Family Of Choice

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Family Of Choice

by StratsWrote

Summary

Will had only gone to therapy with Dr. Hannibal Lecter because Jack had demanded it. He'd intended to get in, get out, and never have to deal with it ever again. He wasn't expecting Dr. Lecter's young daughter to be in the waiting room, or the way she attached herself to him.

((Or: The Season One AU where someone let Hannibal 'Actual Worst' Lecter adopt a child.))

Notes

Ratings, Warnings, and Tags may change as chapters are added. Eventual Hannigram.

What can I say? I like 'AU where everything is exactly the same except for one thing' and I like Kid Fic. And I never evolved to feel shame.

See the end of the work for more notes

Prologue: Apéritif

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One day, when she was no longer connected to them, when no one could trace her path back to their doorstep, Hannibal was going to eat the babysitter.

“If these unexpected overnights are gonna be a regular thing,” Nina began, holding out her hand for her cash, “My rates’ll be going up again.”

“Of course,” Hannibal replied stiffly, helping her into her coat, “I’ll do my best to give you more warning in the future.” This was unlikely, if Jack Crawford planned to continue inviting him along on cases, but arguing with Nina in his entryway at eleven at night was far from his idea of fun. He needed a shower, and then as much sleep as he could manage before visiting hours at the hospital opened up again.

“And you need to leave me something easier to heat up for her, I can’t figure out half these recipes.”

“I’ll leave something you can microwave.” He could cook her into a stew, he thought. Michelle liked stew. Or perhaps, by that point, her palate would be more adventurous, and Hannibal could tempt her into something nicer.

“Good,” Nina sighed, running her hand through her hair. “Tell the kiddo I’ll pick her up for Judo on Thursday, and *please* convince her not to try and get in a cab again if I’m late, one heart attack per week is enough. “She didn’t wait for an answer, shooting an exasperated smile over Hannibal’s shoulder before she left. Hannibal turned to see Michelle in the entryway, rubbing sleep from her eyes. She was already impossibly tiny for seven, and now she was dwarfed by one of his sweaters, sleeves rolled up over her fists.

“That is not your pajamas,” Hannibal chided gently, kneeling to brush tangled blonde hair out of her eyes.

“Smells like you,” Michelle mumbled, reaching up to be held. Hannibal obliged and found that she did indeed smell of him. “Nina sprayed it with your smelly stuff for me.”

“My cologne?”

Michelle nodded, pressing her face against his neck and inhaling. She pulled back to pout.

“You don’t smell like it now, though.”

“I imagine I mostly smell of airport. It’s a very long trip from Minnesota.”

“You’re ‘posed to tell me ‘fore you go on trips,” Michelle whined accusingly. It was a fair point through a child’s eyes, and the other reason Nina still breathed. She was the only sitter

who would still come on a whim if one of Hannibal's patients had an emergency, though for his other late-night endeavors, he merely waited until Michelle was deeply asleep.

"Is that what convinced Nina to sneak you into my bedroom without permission?"

"S'posed to tell me," Michelle repeated, in a sleepy imitation of his own 'disappointed' voice. Hannibal sighed, turning the lights out as he carried her up the stairs.

"We've discussed this, little one. I can't always interrupt sleep or school if there's an emergency, but you know what to do if you find yourself home without me."

"Follow the rules and you'll call when you can," Michelle recited, adding with a muffled giggle, "Listen to Nina, unless she tries to feed me anything that comes from a box."

"There's my girl," Hannibal whispered, pressing a kiss to the top of her head "What made that so hard tonight?"

Michelle shifted uncomfortably in his arms. Hannibal paused in her doorway, taking in the stripped bare mattress and the way Michelle ducked to press her face back into his skin.

"They're under my bed again," She whispered, tiny fists clenching in his shirt, as if she thought he might put her down right that second and shove her under it as well. Hannibal turned quickly, closing the door behind him as he headed or his own room. There, he found his lamp already on, sheets mussed and shoved down on one side, a tiny stuffed tiger peaking up from between the pillows.

"What do we say to nightmares, Michelle?" Hannibal asked, tucking her into bed and shedding his coat.

"I'm lots scarier than any monster," Michelle murmured, hiding her face against the tiger as Hannibal ducked into the walk-in closet to change into his own pajamas. "But you're the one they're really scared of, Tètis, and you weren't here."

It must have been a bad one. Michelle had always had nightmares, since that very first night curled up in Hannibal's old guest bedroom, but normally it only took a few minutes of soothing, a reminder that she was a fierce little thing in her own right. Perhaps he wouldn't eat Nina after all. Nina was loud and foul-mouthed, she plied Michelle with YouTube videos and junk food and thought Hannibal didn't know she smoked inside the house in bad weather. But she was fond of Michelle, despite her posturing, and she knew how best to soothe her on a rough night. The cologne had been a particularly inspired touch.

"Well, I'm here now," Hannibal assured Michelle, climbing into bed and turning out the lights, "And in the morning, we'll check under the bed and you can tell me what I've missed."

Michelle was quiet for a long time, so long that Hannibal was sure she'd finally fallen asleep. Then, "You went to help 'cause of those girls who went missing."

Hannibal remained silent. Michelle was like most children in this, she would eventually come out with what troubled her, given time to babble.

“Nina looks like them,” She finally continued. Hannibal supposed she did, in the eyes of a child. She had different eyes, warmer skin, and was old enough to be chasing her Masters degree, but she had the same hair, and to a seven-year-old, all adults were equally old.

“Nina is a long way from Minnesota, and even if she were not, it has been taken care of,” Hannibal assured Michelle, gently combing his fingers through her hair. “There will be no more missing girls who look like Nina.”

Michelle peered at him, eyes wide in the darkness, just barely lit by the glow of the streetlights. “Did you kill the monster?”

“Not this time,” Hannibal admitted, “But I was with the man who did.”

“Oh,” Michelle mumbled, sounding slightly disappointed, “Can I meet him?”

Hannibal hesitated, just for a moment, reworking a thousand possible paths in his mind. “Perhaps.” He finally said, pulling the sheets up around Michelle’s shoulders. “Now, sleep, little one. No one is coming for you, or for Nina.”

“Good,” Michelle yawned, eyes drifting closed. “She’s *my* Nina.”

Chapter End Notes

Tėtis is, of course, one of several Lithuanian terms for 'Dad.'

Don't worry. There will eventually be an explanation as to how and WHY Hannibal acquired a child.

Come follow me on Tumblr for Hannibal flailing and fic progress updates.

Auspicious Meetings

Chapter Notes

This chapter now contains art!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will was on time for his psych eval. Early, even, despite his original desire to be irritatingly late. In the end, he'd realized he couldn't do that to Dr. Lecter, who'd held Abigail Hobbs's life and then her hand in his own.

So here he was, ten minutes early and fidgeting in the doorway, hesitant to actually enter. There was a tiny blonde child in a pale blue school uniform already there, pacing back and forth in front of the chairs as she hummed along to something in her headphones. She skipped more than she walked, one foot ever so slightly out of tune with the other. Will couldn't remember any mention of Hannibal working pediatrics, and for a moment he worried he'd entered a stranger's home instead of the office.

"Oh!" The kid startled when she saw him, yanking out her headphones. Loud violins filled the room and pounded at Will's skull until she managed to fumble with the iPod and turn it off. "Hi!" She chirped, startled brown eyes locking on his for a second, before sliding right over his features to a point closer to his ear, avoiding eye contact.

"...Hi." Will glanced around the room. It certainly *looked* like a waiting room, with several chairs facing a closed door. "Am I in the right-"

"Doctor Hannibal Lecter's office?" The girl interrupted with a grin. "Yup! Don't you think he should get a sign? I said he should get a sign. He used to have a receptionist, but she left."

"Oh." Will paused, uncomfortable and uncertain, before lowering himself into a chair to wait. There were several other seats to choose from, but the kid hoisted herself into the one right next to Will's, legs swinging several inches off the ground.

"I'm Michelle. What's your name?"

"...Will Graham."

Michelle beamed, hands twisting back and forth excitedly in her lap. "I had graham crackers for snack today," She chirped. It was far from the first time Will had heard a line like that, but he had to admit, it was a lot less irritating coming from a child instead of a coworker.

"Good for you." Will racked his brain, trying to think of something else to say. It had been years since he'd had to hold a conversation with a little kid. Thankfully, one rarely had much of a chance while working homicide, and if you did, it wasn't something you worked hard to remember. "How old are you, Michelle?"

Michelle made a face, nose crumpling up in displeasure. "How come no one ever asks grown ups that, Mr. Graham?"

"It's just Will," Will corrected, "And I guess… Because no one really cares how old grown ups are."

Michelle mulled that one over for a moment, eyes darting back and forth across patterns on the ceiling. "Well, *Will*," She finally began, clearly pleased with the familiarity, "How old are *you?"*

“I asked first,” Will pointed out. Michelle grinned and shook her head, stubbornly waiting for an answer. Will sighed. “Alright, I just turned thirty-six.”

Michelle let out a low whistle, or at least attempted to. It was more a puff of air with a slight squeak to it. Will politely refrained from laughing, despite the comically serious expression on her face.

“That’s pretty old, Will.”

That did it. The laugh broke free, and Will shook his head, smiling up at the ceiling. “Gee, thanks kid. And how old are *you*, now that you’ve had your fun?”

“She’s seven, and not supposed to be here, which she knows very well.” Neither Will nor Michelle had been watching the door, and they both startled at Hannibal’s arrival. Michelle grinned, wide and honest, but with a hint of a child’s inept manipulations.

“Tėtis,” She said, voice pitched slightly higher than it had been with Will, “I missed you!” She lept from the seat, bounding the few scant feet to wrap her arms around Dr. Lecter’s legs. Will realized that what he’d mistaken for a skip was actually a limp, a very slight but still noticeable drag to her right leg.

Dr. Lecter reached down to pat at Michelle’s hair, combing a few fly-away strands down with his fingers. He still looked stern, but Will could see fondness creeping in.

“You saw me just this morning,” Dr. Lecter chided gently, “Michelle, we’ve talked about this. Patient confidentiality.”

“Nina had a emergency,” Michelle told him with an earnest look on her face. Earnest and false. Will would not be surprised if the ‘emergency’ turned out to be Michelle telling her Dr. Lecter had wanted her here.

“Did she now?”

Michelle nodded eagerly, pressing up onto her tiptoes. It didn’t make her much taller, especially with one foot twisted out awkwardly for balance, but it brought the first real smile Will had seen to Dr. Lecter’s face. “Uh-huh!” She continued, “She had a college thing. Last minute. But it’s okay, because Will didn’t mind anyway, right Will?” She gave Will a pleading glance over her shoulder, and Will nodded.

“Yeah, it was fine.”

“Well,” Dr. Lecter said slowly, “If Will didn’t mind...”

Clearly realizing that she’d won, Michelle bounced backwards towards her chair, stiffening and smiling sheepishly when Dr. Lecter continued.

“But this can’t happen again, Michelle. You need to call me if there’s an emergency. I’ll rearrange something for you.”

Michelle nodded, rocking back and forth onto her toes and nearly knocking herself into the seat. “Yes, Tėtis.”

“You can stay out here and work on your homework until Will and I are finished.” Dr. Lecter turned to Will, slowly regaining his usual calm composure. “Shall we?”

Will nodded, following him into the room. “I didn’t know you had children,” he remarked, shutting the door behind them.

“Just the one. Michelle came into my life a few years ago. She’s been with me ever since.”

“Ah.” Will hesitated as Dr. Lecter took a seat, glanced at the seat across from him, and then purposefully evaded it. “She lied to your face, you know.”

Dr. Lecter sighed, glancing down at the fresh notebook he’d pulled from his desk. “Yes, she’s normally not quite so bad at it. But she’s been asking to meet you.”

Will paused in his perusal of the room. “Me? Why would she even know who I am?”

“Michelle is an inquisitive child,” Dr. Lecter said with a slight frown, “and I’m not always able to keep as much from her as I would like to. She has no concept of how far away Minnesota is, and her regular babysitter is dark haired. For a small child, it was enough of a connection.”

“She saw the coverage of the Shrike case,” Will summed up. Dr. Lecter shook his head ruefully.

“Yes, and far more of it than I would have preferred. In Michelle’s eyes, you are the hero who defeated a monster that would have eventually come for one of her favorite people.”

Will turned from Hannibal, hands clenched into fists at his side. He went for the ladder, climbing up to the safe distance of the loft. “Killing Garrett Jacob Hobbs didn’t make me a hero,” he finally spat out, glaring darkly at the shelves.

“It did to one little girl,” Dr. Lecter replied with firm certainty, “And no doubt to another. Or do you think Abigail Hobbs will regret you saving her life?”

Will stared at the books in front of him, not absorbing any of the titles. “No,” He said softly, “I don’t think that.”

“Then perhaps it might not be so difficult to endure a child’s admiration.”

Will ran a frustrated hand through his hair, twisting back towards Dr. Lecter. “What was that she called you?” He asked, reaching for any other topic of conversation.

“Michelle’s relationship with her biological parents was a source of stress for her. When I adopted her, she asked what I’d called my own father. Of the options available, Tėtis was the easiest for her to pronounce at the time.”

“So she doesn’t speak Lithuanian, then?”

“Sadly, no. We’ve been working on Italian, though. A bit more practical for her, and I have some hopes of a vacation when she’s older and more able to enjoy Italy’s artistic merits.”

Will’s frustrated pacing brought him back to the top of the ladder. He sat there, letting his feet dangle over the side of the loft. “That’s pretty impressive for a first grader.”

“Children’s minds are like sponges. It is far easier for her to pick up on a second language at this age, when she’s absorbing everything she can. Will.” The last word was sharper, full of practiced parental sternness. Will was embarrassed to realize it worked; he flinched and ducked his head like he had as a child with his father.

“Yeah?”

Dr. Lecter smiled wryly. “Like any parent, I’m more than happy to ramble on about my child. But that is not why you’ve come here today. Let’s talk about yourself, for a little while.”

Will sighed, leaning back to look at the ceiling. “Yeah, okay. Hit me with your best shot.”

Though Dr. Lecter had ‘rubber-stamped’ Will, clearing him to go back to work, Will felt more off-kilter by the end of his session than he had at the beginning. He was more than ready to go home and collapse with the dogs.

Dr. Lecter, however, paused as he gathered his coat. “Will… Normally, to preserve patient privacy, I have a separate exit, so that clients don’t overlap in the waiting room. However, you are my last patient for the day, and in light of the circumstances...”

“You want to know if I’ll leave through the front and say goodbye to Michelle,” Will filled in.

“If it’s not too much of an imposition.”

Technically, it was. Will was exhausted, and had no clue what to do with kids. Still, Michelle had been pleasant enough, and despite his self-preservation instincts, Will found he *liked* Dr. Lecter. It was hard not to, with the shared experience of Minnesota hanging over them like a shroud.

“Well, she did come all the way here,” Will said with a shrug.

Out in the waiting room, Michelle was exactly where they’d left her, hands twisting in time to her music. She switched the sound off with a slightly more bashful grin than before, looking from Dr. Lecter to Will with a sudden nervousness. “No back door?” She asked, “For patients?”

“No,” Dr. Lecter confirmed, picking up Michelle’s purple coat from the floor and zipping her into it, “Will was kind enough to come through and say goodbye to you. Was there something you wanted to say to him?”

Michelle chewed on her lower lip thoughtfully, peering up at Will from under her hood. Her eyes slid once more over his face, cautious. Then she threw herself forward, knocking Will

back a step in her eagerness to hug him.

“Thank you for saving my Nina,” came the muffled voice, Michelle’s face tucked into the fabric of his coat. Dr. Lecter straightened up, smiling expectantly at Will, who carefully and awkwardly patted the top of Michelle’s head.

“Yeah. You’re welcome.”

Michelle pulled back, smiling broadly, and met his eyes, holding his gaze for three very purposeful, practiced seconds, before letting her eyes drop back down to his collar and reaching for Dr. Lecter’s hand.

“Okay, Tėtis, let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm really glad everyone liked the first chapter! I feel like I should speak up, though, because everyone seems excited for adorable cuteness and... well... There's going to be plenty of that, don't worry, but this *is* a season one AU, and I just want to warn everyone that it won't always be so cute. Everything that happened on the show can be assumed to be happening here unless stated otherwise. Will is still going on cases. Hannibal is still a Cannibal. Abigail Hobbs is still hiding something. Just be cautious, guys. I balance out my cuteness with drama.

Next Time: Hannibal forcibly injects himself further into Will's life, Michelle meets Abigail Hobbs, and someone wears an ugly scarf.

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Interwoven

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Freddie Lounds was an unfortunate necessity. She filled all of Hannibal's criteria for fine dining, but her rudeness was accompanied by an extremely high profile and justifiable paranoia. She was used to people wanting to cause her harm. It would have been more trouble than it was worth to carve her for the table.

She was also a fine antagonist for Will, pushing up against all his boundaries and making him chafe with the stress of it. Hannibal liked to watch his responses, every little tick and twitch of his face. He was loathe to miss out on any this early in the game.

Still, Freddie Lounds might have made things difficult with Abigail, and Hannibal would have preferred things to go a bit more smoothly there. Will was attached to her, Hannibal was intrigued by her, and there were a dozen potential paths he could urge them all down together, if he could manipulate the right attachments.

Those attachments seemed perfectly content to form on their own. Hannibal watched carefully as he and Will took Abigail on a walk through the hospital grounds, discussing their shared trauma.

"Killing someone… It feels that bad?" Abigail asked.

"It's the ugliest thing in the world." Will must have sounded certain to Abigail. She went very still, watching him, before letting out a shaky breath.

"I want to go home."

They were both speaking in half-truths. Hannibal wondered how long it was going to take them both to realize it. There was something shadowy behind Abigail's eyes, Hannibal had recognized it from the beginning. As for Will, even now his hands were trembling, the way they had on the floor of the Hobbs's kitchen, shaking with the memory of fear and righteousness.

They would get there. Little by little, the yarn would unravel. Hannibal waited until Abigail had extracted a promise from Will to attempt to bring her back to Minnesota before he carefully started to stitch in some attachments of his own. Will was staring at the floor instead of either of them, clearly emotionally drained, and Hannibal decided to take pity on him and give him a break from difficult conversation.

"I've a gift for you, Abigail," Hannibal said, pulling the neatly wrapped package from inside his coat. Abigail looked at him curiously, taking the package and prodding at it, testing the soft give.

"Why?"

“I’ve a daughter of my own. She’s been asking about you since I first visited.” Hannibal smiled at Abigail, the same smile he used on Michelle when she mastered a new skill and sought his praise for it. Abigail’s shoulders relaxed ever so slightly as she pulled at the tape. “She was very distraught to learn that children under twelve weren’t allowed on your floor, and insisted I bring you this.”

Hannibal was pleased to note that the gift had drawn Will’s attention as well. He stood just over Abigail’s shoulder, watching as she unwrapped a scarf made of chunky yarn in a rather painful shade of green, scented with oil. It was a mess of knots, places where Michelle had dropped a stitch and Nina had been forced to step in. It was Michelle’s first project, and Hannibal had been more than a bit relieved when she’d demanded he bring it to Abigail. Up until that point, the vibrant, crooked thing had been intended for him.

“How old is she?” Abigail asked, brow furrowed as she ran her fingers over the imperfections.

“Seven,” Will pitched in, glancing from the scarf to Hannibal as if they were two puzzle pieces he couldn’t quite fit together.

“I couldn’t have done this at seven,” Abigail said ruefully, “I never would have had the patience.” Truthfully, neither did Michelle. It had been Nina’s idea, a craft to busy her hands when she was a bit too riled, and it had still taken hours of frustration to get as far as it did. Abigail stared at the scarf for a few more moments before looking up at Hannibal. “Can I meet her?” Behind her, Will gave a little twitch of surprise. Abigail glanced at him briefly, then back to Hannibal. “I’m good with kids. I used to babysit, before.”

Anyone else might have felt a flash of alarm. Hannibal felt the satisfaction of a goal easily met. “Most hospitals have strict rules about young children on their wards. Yours is no exception.”

Abigail frowned, gesturing at the greenhouse around them. “Then she doesn’t need to come to the room. I can meet here out here, right? It’s not like I’m a prisoner. I’m allowed to walk around.”

“I’m sure she would be very excited to meet you,” Hannibal conceeded, deftly ignoring Will’s curious gaze.

“Good,” Abigail said firmly, stuffing the loose wrapping paper into her coat pocket, “It gets boring, seeing the same three people all day. They should hire a bigger staff.” She took a step towards the door and then paused, looking back at Hannibal. “Does she know? Or does she just think you’re visiting some girl for… fun? Work?”

“She knows some,” Hannibal admitted, “She’s curious. She pays attention when I leave on business. But she won’t ask you about it, Abigail, I promise. She merely wants to know you, as Will and I do.”

Abigail frowned, searching his face for any sign of deception, and then nodded. “Okay. You should bring her with then, when we go to Minnesota.”

Will finally found his voice. “That’s probably not the best idea,” He said, shaking his head.

“Why not? It’s not like it’s an active crime scene anymore.”

“I’m afraid Will is right,” Hannibal interjected, “Besides, Abigail, should we manage this trip, it’s for you. For your own peace of mind. You may find you censor yourself if Michelle is there, when you should be able to speak freely about what happened, should you choose. But I can bring her by tomorrow, if that suits you.”

Abigail still looked unhappy, but she nodded. Hannibal counted it as a victory, ever more entwining himself into Will and Abigail’s lives.

Will had certainly had better days. Days that didn’t involve Freddie Lounds dragging him through the mud or long, half hour phone calls with Jack berating him for Lounds’s terrible tabloid writing. It would probably be for the best if he just went home after class, and then straight into the river. It was too warm for ice fishing and a bit too chilly to wade out into the middle of the river, but Will had fished in rougher circumstances.

He was saved from those decisions by Dr. Lecter, or Hannibal, as he was trying to get Will to call him. Hannibal had called around noon, to ask if Will would like to join his and Michelle’s visit to Abigail, and Will had been foolish enough to say yes. Will met them at the hospital, hovering around the entrance. Michelle looked absolutely thrilled to see him, tugging at Hannibal’s hand to try and urge him faster across the parking lot. Every moment she was made to stop and check for cars seemed to wind her up further, and when her feet finally hit the sidewalk, she ripped herself from Hannibal’s side to wrap herself around Will’s legs.

This time, at least, Will had been expecting it, and he went with his instincts, bending down to hug her properly. Given Hannibal’s small smile and Michelle’s excited giggle, this was apparently the correct response. Michelle pulled away from him with a wide grin, pigtails bouncing as she hopped up onto her toes. “I get to meet Abigail today,” She said in a rush, as if afraid no one had told Will.

“So I heard. She liked your gift.”

Michelle looked pleased with herself, reaching back to take Hannibal’s hand again. “Tėtis is here a lot. I’ve been waiting *forever*.” Forever was more akin to ‘about two to three weeks,’ but some days, a week felt like forever to Will, too.

“Well then,” Hannibal said, leading them both along the property, “Let’s not keep Abigail waiting any longer.”

With Michelle not allowed on the floor, Will was the one sent to fetch Abigail. She was wearing the scarf, neon green clashing violently against the deep color of her coat. It folded awkwardly around her neck. She’d had to pin it in place with bobby pins. Michelle looked ready to burst out of her skin when she saw it, bouncing once more at Hannibal’s side and waving from over by a tree, though there was little chance either Will or Abigail could miss a man in an aggressively plaid suit and a little girl in bright purple.

Michelle kept her excitement right up until Abigail was standing right in front of her, and then seemed to realize she had absolutely no idea what to say. She tucked herself partially behind Hannibal's leg, tugging her hood up over her pigtails bashfully. Will would have left her be, not knowing how to assure anyone, which was probably why no one ever asked *him* to babysit.

Abigail, on the other hand, was an old pro. She crouched down in front of Hannibal, reaching out a hand. "Hi, Michelle. It's very nice to meet you. I'm Abigail."

Michelle peeked a little bit further out, sticking out a hand to tentatively shake Abigails'. "You're wearing it."

"I am," Abigail agreed, reaching up to tug self-consciously at the scarf, "It was very nice of you to send me a present."

"You send presents when people are sick," Michelle said softly, "Hospitals are gross. Presents make it better. Did you smell it?"

Abigail nodded along, easily following the chain of thought. "I did. How did you get a scarf to smell like that?"

Will had been close enough when Abigail unwrapped the scarf to notice the scent, but hadn't recognized it. Michelle stepped out from behind Hannibal's leg with a little prodding, reaching up to tug at the end of Abigail's scarf with a tiny grin. "My Nina likes oils," She explained, rubbing a thread between her fingers. "Rose and Orange oils. For sleeping. It's s'posed to relax you." Michelle pulled away, a hint of shyness returning. "Sometimes… Sometimes I have bad dreams. So Nina made me a pillow. And I thought maybe you would have bad dreams too, now, but I don't know how to make a pillow. But now if you wake up, you can grab the scarf for bad dreams."

Abigail watched Michelle with a serious expression on her face, and then reached out to gently tug on the end of one of her pigtails. "Thank you," Abigail said softly, "That was a very thoughtful gift." She straightened back up to her full height, stretching lightly. "Would you like to go for a walk with me? They have a greenhouse here. Kind of a weird thing to keep at a hospital, but they've got some flowers we could look at. Maybe you could tell me more about what scents are good."

Michelle looked up with her with a kind of awe, reaching up to take her hand. "Kay," She said, letting Abigail lead her along.

Will and Hannibal stood back, letting the girls go ahead. "She's good with kids," Will observed, as Abigail slowed her pace to allow Michelle to keep up, "Better than I am, anyway."

"Would it help you to know that I'm not much better?" Hannibal asked. "I've always preferred the company of adults. There is some truth to the idea that one's own child is the exception. I'm sure I wouldn't know what to do with any other. I often didn't know what to do with Michelle when she first came to live with me."

“How old was she?”

“She’d just turned five. She’s almost eight now. Nearly three years. If you’d asked me then, I would have said it seemed a long time, and yet now that I’ve lived it, I find myself wondering where it’s gone.”

“Time flies when you’re having fun?” Will suggested wryly. Hannibal smiled and shook his head.

“It is more that raising a child is an ever-evolving experience. Just when I’ve started to gain my footing and understand what she needs from me, everything changes. There’s not enough time to enjoy one stage of life before the next begins.”

“This is why I just have dogs,” Will joked, “After the puppy stages, it all evens out.”

“I imagine the dogs are also considerably easier to entertain.”

“Throw the stick. Wait for the stick. Throw the stick again. That wouldn’t work on Michelle?”

“For about five minutes. Then I’m afraid we’d be back to loud, plastic contraptions.”

Will laughed. “Better you than me.

Michelle had wanted to meet them at the airport when they came back from Minnesota, presumably more out of a desire to attach herself further to Will and Abigail than to actually see Hannibal a little bit sooner. Hannibal suspected it would have been a terrible idea, particularly now that Nicholas Boyle was dead, or ‘missing.’ Best to give everyone some space to recuperate.

Instead, Hannibal relieved Nina of her duties not long before dinner, seeing her out the door before Michelle joined him in the kitchen. Something simple today, and quick. Something he wouldn’t have to cajole Michelle into tasting.

“Did it help,” Michelle asked as she clumsily tossed and seasoned a salad, droplets of oil splashing out across the counter, “taking Abigail back home? Is she better now?”

Hannibal stepped up behind her to help guide the vinegar with a much more delicate hand. “She is,” He said, pressing a kiss to the top of Michelle’s head, “But it was good that you stayed home. Although I believe Abigail will want for company later this week.”

Michelle mulled that over, letting Hannibal take the heavy salad bowl from her and begin to plate their meal. She dragged her kitchen stool over to the sink, washing up. “Tėtis… She’s ours, isn’t she?”

Hannibal hummed thoughtfully. Michelle looked over her shoulder at him, worrying her lower lip between her teeth.

“I mean, we can keep her” she continued, flapping her hands to shake the water from them, “She belongs with us?”

“Yes, I believe she does.” Hannibal carefully cut up a portion of chicken breast on Michelle’s plate, smiling back at her. “Would you like to keep her?”

Michelle nodded, hopping towards him to help carry plates out to the table. “And Will. I like Will.”

Hannibal settled her into her seat, pushing her in and seating himself at the head of the table next to her. “Then we shall try to keep him as well.”

Chapter End Notes

Originally the plan was to have one chapter per episode, but Oeuf turned out to be 7000 words, which is more than the first few combined, and now I have to find a way to break it up a little. This chapter, however, fits neatly within Potage.

I'm not happy with this chapter, upon rereading. I don't want to write one of those fics where I just write out word-for-word what happened in the show, I assume you have seen the episodes and know what happened. But it feels stilted when I try to sum up where we are in the time line. IDK, I'll work on it as we go through the chapters, and maybe once everything is said and done, I'll go back and make a revised edition. For now, I've already got you all following along, I'm sure you would like to read something new instead of 37 drafts of chapter one!

Also, I've temporarily removed the Autistic Will Graham tag. I do write him with that in mind, but I didn't feel it came across enough to justify the tag. I don't want people to come in expecting more and feel like I've tricked them. It may make a return, we will see.

Monday: Hannibal tells Will how he ended up with Michelle, Abigail comes for dinner, and Will contemplates Barbies. Also, the warnings go way the fuck up from here on out.

Reminiscence

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is longer than the previous three combined. I'd originally intended to split it into two, but there was no neat and tidy place to do that, I always ended up with one very short chapter and one very long one. So I figured 'fuck it, I'm doing this for fun, not a Pulitzer.' And now you get the entire story in one go. Good for you!
>
> Spoilery warnings in the tags and the end note, skip on down there to check them out if you have triggers, they're pretty bad. This is not cutesy like the other three chapters. Bad shit has happened to Michelle. You have probably already guessed that.
>
> This chapter takes place during Oeuf.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Christmas was creeping up with a looming dread. It had never mattered before. Will showed up at work parties, pretended to socialize for half an hour, and then left. His mother was gone, his father was dead, and he came from a long line of only children. Christmas was a bottle of whiskey and his dogs, and Will liked it that way.

This year, there was Abigail. And maybe Michelle. Hannibal? Will wasn't sure. How long did you know someone, interact with them, before they became 'Christmas present' worthy? Will wasn't in the habit of making friends. Sometimes there were workplace Secret Santa drawings, especially back on the force in Louisiana, but Will's scattered handful of intimate relationships never extended all the way to the gift-giving stage. He just wasn't that kind of a people person. Or any kind of a people person.

But Michelle would appreciate the thought, at least, given her apparent idolization of Will (and Abigail and Hannibal and Nina and aparently anyone who gave her the slightest bit of positive attention), and Abigail had no one else to give her presents. And he couldn't do for the both of them and flat out ignore Hannibal, could he?

Hannibal was easy, at least. A bottle of wine, more expensive than Will would justify for himself and highly recommended by the very bored man behind the counter. Abigail was harder, Will wasn't sure he was even ready to think about her. Michelle should be easy, right? Little girls liked… Toys?

Will found himself standing in the middle of a luridly pink aisle, feeling desperately overwhelmed and a little bit sexist. He tapped the ring and middle fingers of his left hand against his palm, over and over, forcing himself to think of facts. Fact: Children liked gifts. It was difficult to get that part wrong. Fact: Hannibal was unlikely to tell him in the event that Will *did* get it wrong, that was rude. Fact: the next aisle held Legos. Michelle would probably

like Legos, everyone liked Legos, right? And this aisle, besides being overwhelmingly hot pink, was needlessly over the top. Will lost his chain of thought, fingers tapping as he glanced over the boxes. He hadn't known Barbie came in so many outfits and set pieces. Astronaut Barbie, Veterinarian Barbie, Chef Barbie, Surfer Barbie, all covered in sparkles even when that seemed ill-advised for the career path. One of the Barbies came with temporary tattoos for Barbie and kids. Will imagined the look on Hannibal's face, as well as the swift end to all his tentative friendships in a single swoop, and pressed onwards.

There was less pink at the end of the shelf, once he pressed past all the Barbies. A particular purple box caught his eyes, just as Will's phone went off in his pocket.

"Hello," He muttered, holding the phone in one hand and grabbing the heavy box with the other. He had to stop tapping to do it; it sent another stressful twinge through him.

"Will? It's Jack. I have a new case for you."

"On my way, where do you need me?" Will hefted the box under his arm and headed for the check out.

Hannibal had mothers on his mind, after speaking to Will. He could barely recall the shape of his own mother, sometimes. She was more a feeling than a person, he'd been so young. He remembered Mischa better, or so it seemed, perhaps because he'd been a parent to her, and she his whole world. Or perhaps because daily he found himself brushing blonde hair out of brown eyes and the images eventually blurred together.

He remembered Michelle's mother quite a bit better. Cathy Holt was tall, redhaired, with dark, damp eyes. Always damp, always upset. She'd sat in the chair across from him, boring and predictable in her troubles. Dissatisfaction with her home life and her children, possible postpartum depression after the birth of her new baby. It was all very textbook.

"*I think there's something wrong with her*," She had whispered, sunk down in her chair. *"You should have seen her when we brought him home, Dr. Lecter. It's not right for a child to look so hateful."* It was the first time Hannibal had heard about her daughter, the first time in three sessions she'd talked about anything but herself.

"I can't give them back what they just *gave away.*" The current case was getting to Will, digging it's claws in sharp and tight. He wanted to tear off all his skin and let the shadows swallow him. Children killing their parents, a mother's forgiveness in dead eyes. Will had never known his mother, did not know what to do with his father, could not reconcile the sudden appearance of children in his life. He paced Hannibal's office, one hand outstretched to run over the fabric of chairs, the sharp antlers of a statue, grounding himself in the presence of texture and touch.

"You resent your own perceived lack of family," Hannibal noted.

"Perceived?" Will asked with a dark laugh. "That would imply I was wrong."

“Blood ties are strong. Ties that we choose and knot ourselves are even stronger. I would hesitate to tell Michelle she lacked family simply because her blood ties had all come undone.”

Will winced, glancing away, towards the windows. “She’s bound to you, regardless, isn’t she? By law, if not blood.”

“It was a process,” Hannibal said thoughtfully, “She was in my care for several months before the adoption went through. She was no less mine in those months, nor I hers.”

“I don’t have anything like that,” Will reminded him.

“Don’t you?” Will looked back to Hannibal curiously, hand stilling over the softly fluttering curtains. “Abigail Hobbs is lost. She seeks new people to tie herself to, and perhaps you and I can offer her the stability she needs.”

“I don’t think she sees us that way.”

“Yet you clearly do. You bought her a gift.” Hannibal gestured towards Will’s bag, tightly bound present still peeking out. Will wanted to throw it.

“A gift I don’t intend to give.”

“But the thought was there. The desire. You have chosen to tie yourself to her. Perhaps in time, Abigail will return the connection.” Hannibal paused, then smiled fondly. “And I believe Michelle would lay claim to you both, given the opportunity. She can be very determined, when she wants something.”

Will flushed, ducking his head. “I bought her a gift too,” He admitted, “It seemed… appropriate. I hope I didn’t overstep.”

“Not at all, Will. I had said before I would like us to become friendly. I would hardly be upset if you should choose to dote upon Michelle. In fact, I might be more offended if you didn’t. Call it parental bias.”

Will laughed softly. His hands dropped back down to his sides and he let himself drift back towards his chair. “I didn’t bring it with me. I wasn’t sure I should.”

“Come for dinner,” Hannibal suggested, “Michelle and I would love to have you. You could bring it then.”

Will hesitated. He didn’t do well with people, Hannibal had to know that by now, and dinner at Hannibal’s home seemed somehow… *more*, than the other moments they’d spent together. “Yeah,” He finally said. “Yes, that sounds… I’d like that.”

Thanks to the case he was working, Will’s dinner would have to be postponed, but Tėtis had promised he would come soon. Michelle had been upset about it anyway, but Tėtis did not put up with tantrums or foot stomping, so Michelle preferred to save those for when she was *extremely, unbearably* upset. ‘Melodramatic,’ Tėtishad called it once, and he’d meant it to be

teasing but now that Michelle knew the word, she loved it. She loved big grown-up words like that, melodrama and circumstantial and analytical. She collected them.

Right now, in the family room with Abigail, Michelle tested out the shape of one of her favorites: capricious. No one ever used that one, except people like Tėtis who liked to observe, and that made it extra powerful. Like most of her words, Michelle never really had a chance to use it, so she jumped on the chance now.

“You’re very capricious today, Abigail.”

Abigail looked up from the harpsichord keys. She’d settled herself into the bench not long after Tėtis had led her into the room and gone back to cook. She didn’t seem to know what to do with the keys, though, occasionally tapping at one and listening for the sound. “That’s a big word,” Abigail said with a dreamy giggle.

“I like big words.” Michelle climbed up onto the bench besides her, plucking out a clumsy attempt at a song Tėtis had tried to teach her. It was harder with Abigail there, taking up space, and Michelle was out of practice.

Abigail closed her eyes and hummed thoughtfully. “Good. Big words take you places. Do you feel that?”

Michelle shrugged. She didn’t particularly want to go any places. Home with Tėtis and Abigail, even a capricious Abigail, was just fine with her. Besides, Tėtis was making eggs. Michelle liked eggs, most days. Some days they got too squishy in her mouth and her whole face felt like it was gonna squish up. “Feel what?”

“The music.” Abigail poked at a few more keys and shuddered. Michelle bit her lip and didn’t say anything.

“Michelle, Abigail,” Tėtis called from the doorway. They looked up with matching smiles. It felt nice to match. “It’s time to come sit at the table. I’ll be in in just a moment. Michelle, why don’t you show Abigail to her seat?”

There were four plates set out at the table, even though Will was not supposed to be coming. Tėtis never forgot anything. Michelle wondered who was coming instead, but the doorbell had rung, so she would probably find out soon.

Michelle led Abigail by the hand, pointing out Tėtis’s seat at the head of the table. “Usually I sit next to Tėtis,” She said, guiding Abigail to sit down, “But you’re the guest so you should today.” Her own place was already set up next to Abigail’s, with the booster with its big fluffy cushion that helped her see over the table. Michelle clamored up onto it with only a little difficulty, long since used to the chair’s height.

“What happened to your leg?” Abigail asked, staring down at Michelle’s feet. Michelle swallowed nervously, tugging at her knee socks to make sure everything was still covered. She hated when people asked. It made her tummy ache, made the whole world tilt sideways and go all wobbly.

“What happened to your *neck?”* She asked Abigail. Tėtis had told her not to ask, told her not to talk to Abigail about the Bad Things. Everyone had Bad Things and you weren’t supposed to make them talk about it if they didn’t want to, but Michelle’s leg was a Bad Thing and Abigail asked about it anyway. It was mean, and Michelle wanted to be mean back.

Abigail hummed softly, reaching up to tug at her scarf. “My dad did it,” She whispered, looking across the room. Michelle looked too, but all she saw was the herb garden, and she didn’t see what was so interesting about that.

“Yeah,” Michelle mumbled, fiddling with her fork, “Mine too.”

Someone must have gone into the kitchen from the other doorway, because neither Tėtis nor anyone else had walked through the dining room, and yet now there was yelling. So much yelling, it bounced through the doorway and right into Michelle’s skull to bounce around in there and mush up her brain. Michelle whimpered and pressed her hands over her ears, ducking her head. Tėtis never yelled. He’d promised Michelle when she moved in that there wouldn’t be any yelling. He had not technically promised that no one would ever yell at *him*, but usually no one dared to try.

“Hey,” Abigail whispered. Michelle felt soft, shaky hands under her arms, hoisting her up, and then she was in Abigail’s lap. She looked up, startled. Abigail was still smiling at the herb garden, but she rocked a little in her chair, humming softly and rubbing Michelle’s back. “Hey, Shelly, no sad faces. It’s dinner time. You like dinner, right?”

It was enough of a distraction. Michelle gave a watery smile, tucking her face against Abigail’s shoulder. “That’s not my name!”

“Sure it is. Michelle Chelle Shelly.” Abigail twisted her fingers through Michelle’s braid, tugging softly in time with her humming. “There we go, all better.”

“You were expecting me?” Michelle looked up at the voice in the doorway. She knew Dr. Alana Bloom, a little bit. Sometimes she got to go to one of Tėtis’s dinners until bed time, and Dr. Bloom was always very nice to her and didn’t try to touch her hair without asking. Michelle offered her a small smile now, nodding along as Abigail spoke.

“Hannibal made breakfast for dinner.”

“Yeah,” Michelle agreed, squirming until Abigail let her down and hopping back into her own chair, “You like eggs, Dr. Bloom?”

“Eggs sound lovely,” Dr. Bloom told her, but she didn’t look at Michelle when she said it even though Tėtis said you had to look at people’s faces when you talked to them. Dr. Bloom was looking at Abigail, who had her funny smile again. Abigail looked like she was asleep with her eyes open. Michelle didn’t like it.

“What is it?” Tėtis asked.

“I see family,” Abigail said, smile spreading wider across her face as she looked at Tėtis and Dr. Bloom. Michelle grinned, leaning forward to try and meet Abigail’s eyes. Abigail was

capricious, but she knew already what Michelle needed Tėtis to teach her: family you picked was so much better.

Eventually, after the case was wrapped up and the boys were collected, Will managed to make it for dinner.

He'd planned on canceling, to be honest. The entire case had drained him. Will wasn't sure he was capable of mentally handling a world where children committed murder. Any cop, former or current, worth their salt knew that any case became ten times worse when a child was involved. The amount of children involved in this one made Will want to let his brain shut down, drink it all away for a long long time.

It was the exact reason he went to dinner anyway. He didn't want to close his eyes and see tiny corpses wrapped into body bags. He showed up at Hannibal's doorstep, early, bearing a bottle of wine with a Christmas bow on it and a carefully wrapped package.

Hannibal answered with a small smile, Michelle hovering around his feet, bouncing onto her toes to try and get a peek at Will before he even made it in the door.

"You said gifts were okay," Will mumbled, holding out the bottle awkwardly. Hannibal took it, eyeing up the label while Michelle eagerly showed Will where to hang his coat and tuck his shoes, bouncing in tandem with the way Will's fingers tapped.

"A good choice, Will. It won't quite match tonight's dinner, but I'll save it and plan something nice for us around it."

Will flushed, holding Michelle's gift in front of him like a shield. "I had help. The guy at the store had a lot to say about it, I let him make the final choice."

"Well, regardless how it came to you, it will be a good accompaniment to our next meal together." Next meal, as if it was as simple as that. As if Will's company could be wanted again, so easily, before they'd even sat together the first time. Will turned his head away, dodging Hannibal's knowing gaze and Michelle's curious glance. He let Hannibal lead him out of the entryway, offering him a glass of wine in the kitchen.

"I get to have sparkle juice," Michelle informed him, eager to remind them both of her presence. "'Cause it's a special occasion."

"It's just me," Will protested, swallowing a larger mouthful of wine than he'd meant to.

"Yeah, but you're *Will,"* Michelle reminded him, as if that summed it up. To her, it probably did. Children were simple, were *supposed* to be simple. "And it's Christmas! Well, late Christmas. Tėtis said you were busy for actual Christmas."

Tiny charred body in the fire place, home for the last family Christmas. Will cringed and swallowed another mouthful of wine, placing Michelle's gift on the island that dominated much of the sleek kitchen. "Here, I got you this." He tapped with his nails now instead of his fingertips, letting crescents dig their way into his palm.

Michelle gripped the counter top between her fingers, standing on tiptoe to peer over the edge at the clumsy wrapping paper. Hannibal came to her rescue, pulling a small step-stool out from under the sink and unfolding it for her. Michelle hopped up with careful motions, poking at the paper hesitantly before diving in with all the grace and poise of a rabid animal. She made a tall stack of ripped paper at one end of the counter, flapping her hands with excitement when she revealed the Easy-Bake Oven. “Look, Tėtis, I can cook like you!”

Will snuck a peek at Hannibal, who looked exactly as pained as Will had predicted, and then had to hide his laughter in his wine glass when Hannibal looked back. Pained, but amused in a way. Something settled down in Will’s stomach. He forced himself to stop tapping.

“That’s certainly… Interesting,” Hannibal conceded, tidying up the mess Michelle had made. “Why don’t you go put that in your room while I finish dinner?”

Michelle carefully hefted the box into her arms, wobbling slightly under the awkward weight. Will rescued her before she could send herself toppling off the step-stool, guiding her down to the floor and then taking the box back. “Here, I’ll carry it, you show me the way.”

From Will’s very limited experience, kids liked to show off, and Michelle was no exception. She bounded ahead of him, careful on the steps with her right foot but still faster than Will, or any adult, was going to run up a flight of stairs. She waited at the top, impatient, and then led him down the hall to the last door on the left.

Will’s instinctive duck towards a purple gift had apparently been the correct one; Michelle’s entire room was a sea of purples and blues, from the soft rug beneath Will’s feet, to the imposing queen sized bed with it’s glittering canopy. “That is… something,” Will muttered, setting the box on top of Michelle’s dresser. He had to nudge aside a few school participation ribbons and a framed photo of Michelle and Hannibal at a beach to make it fit. Michelle looked even smaller, clinging shyly to Hannibal’s arm as he crouched down next to her.

“Ocean city,” Michelle explained, crowding next to him to look at the photo. “Tėtis asked a lady to take our picture. We don’t have a lot of pictures with both of us, ‘cause who’d hold the camera? So I like this one.” She tugged at Will’s arm, pulling him away from the photo and guiding him on a forceful tour of the room. She didn’t have the over-abundance of brand names Will would expect from a little girl’s room, no princesses or Sesame Street, or whatever it was little kids were into these days. Her toys were all geared towards imaginative play, including a large set of heavy-looking wooden blocks and a sturdy wooden kitchen pressed up next to her little desk. Even the dollhouse in the corner was an actual dollhouse, sturdy realistic miniatures rather than Barbie Pink plastic. There *was* a small box of Barbies nearby, but it looked relatively untouched.

“Tėtis doesn’t like them,” Michelle explained when she showed off the box, “I think he thinks Barbie is creepy. I got some from my classmates for my birthday last year, but they’re too big for my dollhouse, so I don’t really play with them.”

“Nice room,” Will finally said, hands in his pockets as Michelle bounced from one corner to the other. “Bigger than mine was at your age.”

“It used to be a guest room,” She said, shrugging, “I got to keep the bed. I like it big. I don’t fall off it like if I nap on the sofa.” She ran her fingers over the soft comforter, before turning back to Will. “We should wash up for dinner! Tėtis won’t like it if we’re late.”

“No, probably not,” Will agreed.

Despite what Will had heard of Hannibal, dinner was not any form of offal. Instead, Hannibal served turkey in a sweet, unfamiliar sauce, with simple vegetables neatly arranged on the side. Hannibal sat at the head of the table, with Michelle and Will on either side of him. As a child, Will’s father had propped him up on heavy phone books to lift him over the edge of the table. Will still remembered shifting in discomfort, occasionally having to readjust as he slid right off the cheap plastic chair. Michelle, on the other hand, had a sturdy booster, carefully cushioned and patterned to match the cushions of the other chairs. She climbed into it with little struggle, allowing Hannibal to push her chair in.

“I hope you’ll forgive the fare,” Hannibal said, refilling Will’s wine glass, “Michelle has a sensitive palate, one which we are still working to broaden. I felt that your very first meal with us would be more comfortable for all if everyone was able to eat comfortably.”

Michelle grinned sheepishly, ducking her head and poking distrustfully at a strand of asparagus before taking a bite. Will tried to picture his own response at the age of seven if someone had tried to feed him heart, and winced, glad to have missed out on that performance. “This is delicious,” He said, shaking his head, “There’s nothing to forgive.”

Hannibal looked pleased with himself, taking a bite of his own food and closing his eyes to savor it. “Thank you, Will,” He said when he was finished, “Be that as it may, you’ll have to come again. I would love to hear your opinion on something a bit more complex.”

“You just like to hear people compliment you,” Will said, tongue loosened by his second glass of wine. He flushed with embarrassment, but Hannibal didn’t seem to take offense.

“Don’t we all?” He responded, smiling.

Conversation flowed slowly after that, though not uncomfortably. Michelle carried much of it, chattering along about whatever popped into her head. Instead of shyness, Will’s words were stilted by the food, rich and flavorful on his tongue. They ate slowly, savoring, and by the time they were finishing up dessert (a carefully crafted apple pie that tasted like no apple pie Will had ever eaten), Michelle was starting to lean into her plate, eyes drooping. Hannibal smiled fondly at her, and then at Will, which was a bit more puzzling. Will avoided his eyes, staring at the knot of his tie instead.

“Someone should be getting to bed,” Hannibal said gently. Michelle gave a soft, wordless noise of protest, which Hannibal ignored, deftly scooping her up into his arms. Despite her supposed displeasure, Michelle tucked her face against his shoulder, eyes closed. Hannibal turned to Will. “If you wouldn’t mind waiting in the family room, just across the hall, I’ll be back shortly.”

“I can go,” Will said hastily, straightening up, “Don’t rush on my account.”

“Nonsense. We have a very brisk bedtime routine, and then you and I can talk without the interruption of a meal. Besides, I’d be a very poor host if I asked you to see yourself out.”

Will found any further arguments dying on his tongue, as Hannibal didn’t pause to hear them out, briskly heading out the door and up the stairs. Feeling like a bit of a burden, Will took a few minutes to clear the table, rinsing the plates, though he didn’t dare start scrubbing at the delicate china. For all he knew, Hannibal had an entire routine Will would be ruining.

True to his word, Hannibal joined Will in the other room only a few minutes after Will migrated there. He left his wineglass on the table by the other end of the sofa Will had claimed, busying himself with the fireplace. Will was still nursing the last glass Hannibal had poured him, weighing how much he’d had against how long he would have to wait to drive home safely. He watched Hannibal manipulate the logs, quietly ruminating over the past few weeks.

“Did you always know you wanted kids?”

Hannibal paused, stepping back to admire the small flame he’d managed to coax into existence. “Before Michelle, I don’t believe I wanted children at all.”

That wasn’t the answer Will had been expecting. “Seriously?”

Hannibal hummed thoughtfully, settling in at the other end of the sofa. “Michelle was… happenstance. I was quite literally in the right place at the right time. Had I done things slightly differently that day, I likely never would have met her at all.”

“How *did* you meet her?” Will had wanted to ask for a while now, since he’d first met her. He’d seen Hannibal’s tidy suits, his expensive furnishings. He knew the kinds of events and parties Hannibal was known for, and none of it seemed to fit the picture of a single father.

Hannibal stared into the fire, pensive. “Her mother was a patient of mine,” He finally said, “Catherine Holt. She suffered, at the very least, from postpartum psychosis after the birth of her second child, although at the time I merely believed her to be depressed. There were other problems, other things I suspected, from the way she spoke about her family, but nothing I could prove thoroughly enough to break confidentiality.”

“What sort of things?”

“I believed her husband was abusing her. I worried he was a threat to the children. I could not offer proof of either of those things to anyone, had they asked. Catherine wouldn’t speak of her own abuse and insisted he hadn’t harmed the children.”

Will nodded. He’d done the same more than once, struggling to explain logical leaps that looked like magic to others. There was a limit to how much people would believe without something concrete before them.

Hannibal sighed. “Before I continue, Will, you must understand. Ethically, I can only violate patient confidentiality to prevent harm. I cannot do it for things that have already happened, nor for things I am only mildly suspicious of. At the time, I was doing all I was permitted to.” He paused, sipped at his wine some more. “Catherine and I had weekly sessions. One day, she simply didn’t show up. She called to tell me that everything was going to be fine now, that she had figured out how to solve all of her problems. She was going to fix everything.”

Will’s stomach dropped. He set his wine glass down, suddenly nauseous. Hannibal continued, eyes on the fire.

“I keep detailed records of my patients. I know their numbers, their home addresses. Michelle’s family did not live far. Catherine walked to her appointments. I should have called the police, but, I confess, I panicked. It was the loss of a patient that eventually drove me from surgery. I wanted to prevent the loss of any more.”

“You went to the house.”

“I did. I was likely faster than the police would have been, but I wasn’t fast enough.” Hannibal turned to Will, a tight, pained expression on his face. “Michelle was the one who later pieced things together for the police. Catherine had smothered her son in his crib.” Will had seen it coming. He flinched anyway. “Her husband had come home in the middle of it. He was a violent man to begin with. He killed Catherine with a knife he took from their kitchen and went after Michelle. The house was old and the carpets were worn. He tripped on the stairs chasing her. I arrived in time to see his neck snap.”

Will closed his eyes. He could picture it easily, years of crime scenes building up his senses until he could smell the blood. Michelle would have been even smaller, some tiny thing looking up at Hannibal from the foot of the stairs, the only member of her family remaining. She would have- “Did she see?” Will asked, mouth dry, “Michelle, was she in the room when...” He opened his eyes to look at Hannibal, who still looked pained.

“Yes.”

Will sighed, gripping a small piece of his shirt between two fingers and rubbing the fabric rhythmically. “I guess she’s lucky she has you, then.”

“I’ll admit, that was part of the draw. I knew she would need someone and I… I felt responsible. I did not see it in time.”

Will shook his head and leaned forward, surprising himself and Hannibal both when he placed a hand on Hannibal’s arm. “It’s not your fault.” Will cleared his throat, unused to being the comforting one in a conversation, “You aren’t responsible for what happened.”

“No,” Hannibal agreed, “The fault lies entirely with people who are no longer here to take the blame. But one’s emotions and one’s logic are not always so easily intertwined.”

That, Will could also understand, intensely and personally. “So you kept her?”

“It was a bit more complicated. A few weeks of red tape and paperwork. But yes, in the end, she came home with me. My hope is that she will always find home here.”

The night had gone well, Hannibal mused to himself as he saw Will out. Will continued to bond with Michelle, as Hannibal had hoped he would. Equally hoped for, but less expected, was the way Will had bonded with *him*. Hannibal suspected he could have convinced Will to spend the night in the guest room, had he plied him with just a bit more wine. As it was, Will left with something to think about, a story that would both cast Hannibal in a good light and endear Will further to Michelle. People liked to look after broken things, and as broken as he was himself, Will was no exception.

Will, in all his jagged edges, was fascinating. Hannibal wanted to rip him yet further apart and then seal him back together, lines of fresh gold sealing the cracks in his armor. He could taste the shadows on Will’s skin, see the way he would be so beautifully intense if he would just follow where Hannibal led him.

Step by step. They would get there soon enough.

There were dishes in the sink in need of attention, but Hannibal was in need of attention as well. He viewed himself as separate from other people, but not entirely inhuman, and now he gave in to one of the more simple human instincts. He let himself wander up the stairs, stopping in the doorway to Michelle’s room. She had two night lights set up with a soft glow, one across the room, lighting up the open closet, and one under the bed, in case she woke from a nightmare brave enough to check for herself. She had moved from where Hannibal had left her, sprawled diagonally across the bed with the sheets kicked down around her ankles. There was no tension in her face as she slept, none of the stress or worry that still clung heavy and weighted to her, even now. Michelle was, for the most part, a happy child, and Hannibal was not so removed from emotion to be ungrateful for it, but her fears tended to cloud her. There were no fears tonight, just smooth, softened features and a gentle snuffle as she breathed, little noises that Hannibal had learned to listen for on dark nights.

Hannibal took a moment to adjust Michelle back towards the middle of the bed, tucking her back into her blankets. This was all he’d come in to do, just to make sure she was well asleep and warm. He could go back downstairs and clean up. He could curl up in the family room with a book. He could go for a hunt, should he choose, Michelle was deep enough asleep, and knew how to work the phone should she wake to find him gone.

He did none of those things. He stood by the edge of the bed and watched her breathe, his fierce, terrifying little thing.

Hannibal had known, of course, from the second Cathy Holt had sat down in his office, exactly what she was trying to hide from him. He had known that the bruises on her arms came from her husband. He had suspected the same treatment of the children. He hadn’t been lying to Will; technically, there was nothing he had proof of. But had he pushed, and Hannibal knew exactly how to push, he might have been able to uncover evidence, might have been able to get Cathy to open up.

Or, he could push in another direction, and see what Cathy became.

"She hates the baby. She's told me so herself, used those exact words." Cathy had glared at him, expectant, demanding in her desire to be understood.

"*It is perfectly normal for an only child to exhibit some jealousy over the arrival of a new baby."*

"*There's nothing **normal** about her, Dr. Lecter. It's not jealousy, it's hatred. "*

Hannibal had made a note in his book, watching Cathy carefully. "Do you feel resentment, for having your attention split between your older child and the new baby?"

"*I don't **resent** her," Cathy had protested, "She's a kid. She's my kid. Like it or not. I just wish she wasn't so damn weird."*

"*And how does your husband feel about all of this?"*

Cathy had laughed at him then, derisive and unpleasantly loud. "Stephen doesn't give a damn. If she hates the baby, if she loves the baby, whatever. Stephen cares about Stephen."

"*If you're concerned your husband is a threat-"*

"*He's not a threat." She closed off to him then, shutting down, blank faced and stern. "I know I'm not the best mother, Dr. Lecter, but I wouldn't let him hurt my children."*

"I wouldn't let him hurt my children." Weeks later, Cathy repeated the statement, unprompted. Hannibal watched her with a cool gaze, calculating the way her hands trembled in her lap.

"*Of course not. You're their mother."*

"*Accidents happen, though."*

"*They do." It was not a confession, but Hannibal made another note in his book. He found cruelty towards children to be distasteful. He was not fond of people as a whole, regardless of the size they came in, but children could not be held to the same standards as adults, and allowances had to be made for them. "Are you telling me one has?"*

"*No," Cathy said firmly, "And I'm not saying one would. I'm just saying maybe it wouldn't be my fault if it did."*

"*If you failed to prevent it."*

Cathy shrugged uneasily. "It's not like I'd just let something bad happen."

"*But you seek absolution for potential failure."*

*Cathy looked up at him, eyes narrowed. "I wouldn't **let** it," she repeated, "If I could stop it, I would. I'm not a failure. It just wouldn't be my fault if I couldn't. "*

"*It's a mother's instinct to protect her children." He noticed how specific her words were. 'If.' 'If I could.' A push, then, soft and careful. "It is impressive, what people find they can do given the right motivation. Of course, you must do your best to protect your children. You're the only one who can."*

She had nodded, face pinched and thoughtful.

Cathy had been shaking again. There was a bruise, bright and blossoming just under the cuff of her sleeve. She didn't mention it. "I don't love him anymore," She said, "I want him to leave."

"*Have you spoken to a lawyer yet?"*

She'd shaken her head. "He wouldn't sign any papers. I know he wouldn't."

"*Then you must take matters into your own hands."*

"*He won't listen to me. He does what he wants."*

"*There are resources I could offer you."*

"*I don't want them. Why should **I** have to leave? He should go. It was my home first."*

"*Then you are the only one who can change your fate, Cathy. The only one who can protect yourself and your children."*

"*I don't think I'm strong enough."*

"*One can do amazing things," Hannibal reminded her, "Given the right motivation."*

She'd looked at him then, properly looked at him, eyes open and hollow. "I'll think about it."

-----
*"Hello, Dr. Lecter." Through the phone, Cathy's voice was shaking and tinged with the hollow sound all electronics supplied. He could hear her breathing heavily. In the background, a child cried. "This is Cathy Holt. I'm calling because I won't be needing our appointment time this week. Or next week." She drew in a shaking breathe, "I've figured it out. I can fix it. I'm the only one who can, like you said. Keep them safe. Keep **me** safe. An end to all our problems. Thank you, Dr. Lecter. Goodbye."*

*Hannibal didn't delete the voicemail. He tucked his phone back into his pocket instead, checking the clock. Cathy had been his last appointment of the day, and she didn't live far. It was so rare that he was able to actually **see** the outcome if his hard work, and of course, there would be a record of the outgoing call. It would look very strange if he didn't check on his client after such an unusual message.*

Hannibal took as much time as he could justify, letting Cathy have the time she needed to work. The house was quiet when he arrived, eerie in its silence. Whatever had happened was

over now.

"*Cathy?" Hannibal called, projecting concern as he climbed the porch steps. The door was ajar, just slightly. Hannibal nudged it with his knee and stepped inside.*

There was a staircase right in the entry. Stephen Holt lay at the bottom , neck twisted, eyes unseeing. The blood was still pulsing weakly from a scrape on his forehead; he had not been dead long. Hannibal looked up to the top of the stairs, at the tiny little thing standing there, blood all over her yellow shirt, thick chef's knife still in her hand. Her short blond hair was turning pink in places. She stared at him, through him, with dark, empty eyes.

"*I didn't mean to," She whispered, looking from Hannibal to the body. Interesting.*

"*What have you done?" Hannibal asked, kneeling besides the body and making a show of checking the pulse. Little footsteps trod down the stairs to join him.*

"*I just wanted it to stop."*

"*Did you push him?"*

"*Tripped," She said, one hand beginning to tap out a stressful rhythm against her hip, "Like a cartoon. I didn't think it would work. He was yelling. I just wanted him to stop yelling."*

Hannibal nodded slowly, looking the girl over. There was an old bruise blossoming over her collarbone, and she stood awkwardly, one foot twisted out at an odd angle, but with no sign that the stance caused her pain . The injuries were old. None of the blood was hers, and Stephen had not been stabbed. Hannibal straightened up to his full height. "What is your name?"

"*Michelle." She looked up at him, gaze vacant, somewhere off to the left of his face. She looked hopeful; here was an adult who might tell her what to do next. Hannibal remembered the last time a tiny blonde thing had looked up at him with big, trusting brown eyes. He held out a hand.*

"*Show me what you've done, Michelle."*

The bedroom she led him to might once have been a soft, pale pink. Cathy Holt was sprawled across the floor staining it red, slices on her arms and holes ripped in her stomach. There was a pillow on the floor, just by her hand, and the tiny toddler bed had been mussed, sheets kicked to the floor and splattered with the beginning splashes of red.

"*How did you get the knife?"*

Michelle pointed to her bed. "Under the pillow. I put it there after last time."

"*Did she put the pillow over your face?"*

The little hand flinched in his grip, but held firm. Michelle ran her free hand over her cheek, twisting and tapping it against the reddened skin there. She nodded. "She said she was going

to make it stop." Michelle looked up at Hannibal, tugging at his hand. "I just wanted it to stop," She said again, quieter.

It would have to have been luck. Michelle was undersized, too thin and too small. Even with the knife in play, Cathy should have been able to subdue her from her position atop the pillow. The first slice, therefor, must have been the one at the neck, or perhaps one of the sharp stabs to her chest. The others would have been afterwards, an angry child lashing out at a monster that could no longer fight back. Hannibal suspected Cathy was already dead by the time the last blows fell.

Satisfied with his conclusions, Hannibal looked around the room finding nothing else of note. "Where is the baby?"

Michelle shook her head, hand twitching harder against her skin until it made a rough, repetitive thunk. Hannibal watched her for a moment, then took her hand and guided it until her motions were softer, gentler. Michelle continued the movement when he let go, a smooth rub over the red spot on her cheek.

"*Did you hurt the baby, Michelle?"*

"*Not me. Not this time."*

Cathy had gone for the baby first, then. A shame. The death of a child was always unfortunate. He'd been so sure she would go for her husband.

"*They'll be mad when they wake up," Michelle whispered.*

Hannibal knelt down to her level. "They aren't going to wake up, Michelle. Do you understand what it means to be dead?"

She hesitated, then nodded. "Like Grandma. They don't come back."

"*That's right. You've killed them, Michelle. You're going to be in a lot of trouble." Hannibal watched the flicker of expressions across the little girl's face, thinking. He hadn't been expecting this, hadn't been able to, not with what little he knew of Cathy's children, but he was fascinated. The youngest of his personal projects had been 11, back when he was young himself, at school. This was something new. Something to watch progress from its very inception.*

Michelle whined, distressed, and shook her head. "Didn't mean to."

"*But you did it. You've done a very bad thing, Michelle. They'll take you away."*

"*Nooo..."*

Hannibal looked at her, thinking through the different paths he could take. She didn't meet his eyes, but didn't look away from him, either. Caught before him, a seedling he could encourage, or squash.

"*I might be able to help you. But you'll have to do exactly as I say. Can you do that for me?"*

Michelle nodded, eager.

"*Let me tell you what we're going to make them see. Then you will repeat, alright?"*

There was no evidence to tie him to this crime scene. If she failed, it would only reflect badly on her. She might repeat some of the things he had said, but those could easily be swept under the rug, put down to a traumatized child's misunderstanding. Hannibal was confident in his ability to out-think a kindergartner. A child covered in bruises was a child used to lying. Hannibal didn't think she would fail.

"*Okay." Michelle's eyes slid across his cheekbones, the bridge of his nose, a hesitating stop on his pupils before they dropped once more. Hannibal took the knife from her, reciting a short version of the same story he would go on to tell the police. He made Michelle repeat it, back and forth, three more times before he was finally satisfied.*

"*This will be difficult," Hannibal said, reaching out to gently ruffle Michelle's hair. She flinched at first, then sank into the touch when no pain came. "But if you do well, I will make sure this is the last time someone hurts you." He led her down the stairs, carefully wrapped the knife in Stephen Holt's hand, and then reached for his phone.*

"*One more time, Michelle. What happened today?"*

At the time, Hannibal had thought Michelle might break under the pressure. An older child might have, with dozens of adults asking her to repeat her story, but Michelle had advantages. Hannibal had told the same story, and there was only so much pressure people were willing to put on a five year old. That she was on the spectrum had helped; her flat tone set off no alarms, nor did her apparent dissociation from the crime.After the first few interviews, Hannibal was sure Michelle herself believed the story. It was easy to sway a child, particularly one who wanted to be swayed.

And now she was home, with him. His fierce little one. When she was older, stronger, he would push her more, remind her of where she had started. For now, Hannibal would teach her other things, mold her intelligence and charm. He would raise her, as he had not been able to raise his Mischa, and when she was ready, he would watch her transformation with pride.

Hannibal pressed a kiss to Michelle's hair and returned to the dishes.

Chapter End Notes

Everything that follows is spoilers for this chapter.

Trigger Warnings For This Chapter: Canon drug use, discussions of spousal and child abuse, non-detailed references to injuries from previous abuse, discussions of postpartum mental illness, character death/murder, descriptions of corpses, canonical child death. non-canonical infanticide (mentioned, off screen, not detailed), non-canonical attempted murder of a child, Hannibal's terrible therapy, manipulation of a child. PLEASE tell me if I've missed any so I can add them.

I really REALLY want to make clear that Hannibal is telling the truth when he says he didn't know the children were being abused. He had reason to be suspicious, but he did not know for sure. He also did not know that Cathy would attack her children, he had been goading her towards murdering her husband. I feel like even for Hannibal Lecter, there are certain things that would make a character irredeemable to me, and allowing for child abuse/murder is one of them, so let's just all agree that if Hannibal had known the kids were in danger, he would have reported something and prevented it, even if it meant ending his game with Cathy. Just for my own sanity, let's pretend Cathy was just that good of a liar (and she was in fact lying, or rather playing Hannibal's own game of half-truths. She did not 'let' her husband abuse the children, she just didn't consider herself capable of preventing it).

Anyone wary of the idea that a five year old is capable of murder should remember that this was accidental and done in self-defense/rage. Michelle did not sit down and premeditate the murder of her parents. She just got really lucky twice.

Please do not judge real people with postpartum depression/psychosis or real children with autism based on this fic. This is one very specific example of FICTIONAL people who were also living in a severely abusive and fearful environment, people with postpartum health issues deserve kindness and understanding, and children with autism are not any more violent than NT children.

(Also Hannibal comes across as a bit emotionless here, due to circumstances. Rest assured that he feels things and I am still building up to mutual Hannigram affection.)

I'm still leaving off the autistic Will Graham tag, but I'm expecting it to make a reappearance.

I don't have a quirky chapter preview for next time because I'd intended next time to be the second half of this chapter, so the writing isn't done. But it will be up Thursday.

Please let me know if you would prefer some longer chapters and some shorter ones as the story requires, like we've done, or if you would rather they all be broken up into 1000-3000 word chapters. My update schedule will stay the same regardless.

(Also also, Hannibal and Will's opinion on Barbies does not reflect my own. I fucking love Barbie, fight me.)

Maladies

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter can be found at the end.
This chapter takes place during Coquilles.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Although I may be, is it safe to assume you're not sleepwalking now?" Will flinched, ducking his head. It was pretty inappropriate to just show up at your psychiatrist's doorstep at the crack of dawn without so much as a text message.

"Will."

Will looked up to see that Hannibal's face had softened. He still looked tired, but there was concern there, too.

"It's alright. My kitchen is always open to friends. If here is where you need to be, then here is where you should be." Hannibal went back to fussing with his entirely-too-fancy coffee machine, talking Will through his latest mishap. Will could still feel the places where stones had dug into his feet, and by the time coffee was ready, he almost agreed with Hannibal's interpretation of the situation; it would be really fucking nice if this was somehow all Jack's fault. At least then Will could stop feeling crazy.

He wasn't going to take a break, though, even if Hannibal seemed convinced that work was the source of all of his problems. He liked what he did. It was the only purpose he had.

The first sip of coffee reminded Will of just how little sleep he was getting. He let Hannibal lead him to the table, sinking into the chair and pressing his face to the wood with a groan, etiquette be damned. He swore he saw a flash of amusement in Hannibal's eyes when he looked up, but it was gone too fast to be certain.

"I'm going to need another cup of this," Will told him, waving inefficiently at the coffee. "Or six."

"As many as you need," Hannibal assured him. "Take your time, Will. I've nowhere to be this weekend, nor have you so far."

Will nodded his thanks and straightened up, nursing the coffee. Little footsteps came down the hall, faint and uneven. Michelle arrived in the dining room in over-sized green pajamas, thick socks, and a robe that matched Hannibal's. She rubbed sleep from her eyes, shuffling in and then pausing, taking in the two men at the table. A little smile broke out on her face. Will had just enough time to set his coffee down and push his chair back before she was on him, skillfully clamoring into his lap. "Will! You came for breakfast?"

Will caught Michelle carefully, adjusting her to sit properly in his lap. He let her cuddle close, head tucked under his chin. She smelled like strawberries, not the overwhelming scent of brightly colored children's shampoo, but real strawberry, natural and subtle. Will took a deep breath, the thick scent of coffee, strawberry, and Hannibal's familiar dining room settling into him and bringing him back down from his stressful precipice.

"That's right," Hannibal said, before Will could respond, "Will has come to spend the morning with us." That wasn't at all what Will had intended, but Michelle was out of his grasp before he could respond, dancing up onto her toes and flapping her hands in overwhelming, contagious excitement. Will found himself smiling.

They made crepes. 'They' was not an exaggeration, either; Hannibal deftly arranged the kitchen to give everyone a job. Will found himself helping Michelle decipher the recipe card, written in Hannibal's elegant script. It was neatly and carefully arranged, but Michelle apparently couldn't read cursive, and needed a guiding hand to help her mix the batter without spilling. Hannibal busied himself chopping fruit, before assembling the entire ordeal into food Will felt he could not possibly have helped with.

Michelle was overeager, constantly underfoot in her excitement. The third time she nearly knocked Hannibal over at the stove, he guided her to a drawer in the corner. "Wind down, little one." He said gently. Michelle dug through what, in anyone else's home, would have been called the 'junk drawer.' In the Lecter household, even this was carefully organized. Will caught a glimpse of several brightly colored toys before Michelle selected a small ball of clay, seating herself in the armchair in the corner to fiddle with it. Will supposed it was as good a reason as any to keep a leather chair in one's kitchen.

"We keep things all over the house for Michelle," Hannibal explained, flipping the last of the crepes onto a plate, "Better to give her something quickly when she gets overstimulated than trust her to make it all the way to her room."

"You sound like you've tried it before." Will grabbed the plates, helping Hannibal carry their dishes out to the dining room.

"She broke a vase," Hannibal said, sounding pained, "*Twice.* Parenting, you will find, is largely trial and error."

Hannibal Lecter, dealing with the same kind of parenting woes as any other normal human. It remained as baffling now as it had been the first time Will saw it.

Michelle brought the clay to the table, smacking it down next to her plate with a satisfying thunk. "Hands," Hannibal reminded her, and though she didn't appear to have returned to earth fully, she disappeared to briskly wash her hands. By the time she returned, Will and Hannibal had carefully arranged the meal, with glasses of orange juice, another round of coffee for both men, and what Will considered to be unnecessary amounts of cut fruit. Michelle dug in happily, Will and Hannibal following suit in a much tidier fashion. It was soothing, being here with them, peacefully enjoying a home-cooked meal. Back in Wolf Trap, Will would be shoveling down overcooked toast and significantly cheaper coffee, bent over

his own lap on the porch while the dogs loped around in the front yard. There was something to be said for that too; Will enjoyed the company of his dogs and the peaceful quiet of a morning at home. But it was not what he needed right now. Had he stayed home today, he would have continued to careen headfirst into a meltdown.

He didn't have to do this alone anymore, Will realized. They had welcomed him in with open arms, literally in the case of Michelle. When things became too much, he could come here, and there would be a place for him.

Will wasn't sure yet what to make of that.

Bella Crawford was a pretty lady, and she didn't want Michelle to call her Mrs. Crawford. "Mrs. Crawford was my Mother-In-Law," She had said, "You can just call me Bella." Just Bella, not even Miss Bella like the adults at school. Michelle liked her. She liked when adults treated her like they treated other adults. Mr. Crawford let her call him Jack, too, but he wasn't pretty or soft like Bella. He was towering, and whenever he wasn't smiling he had a stern face. Michelle was wary of men who had stern faces. She wasn't very good with faces to begin with, and men like Jack had scrunchy grumpy faces even when they were pleased. Michelle had a picture book Tėtis got for her that had dozens of faces and clear descriptions of emotions, and the book always failed her with men like Jack.

Besides, Jack was Will's boss, and Michelle had heard Tėtis and Will talk about how hard Will worked for Jack. Sometimes Will got a funny far-away look, like he wasn't there with them anymore, and Michelle knew it was Jack's fault. Michelle did not like Jack.

But Bella, "Bella Bella Bella," like Jack said, was pretty like her name, and she smelled good, and when Michelle asked to sit by her for dinner, Bella had plucked her right up from the ground and set her into her seat with a little kiss on the top of her head. This must be what it was like to have a mother, a *real* mother, not like Michelle's mommy.

She was getting a little fuzzy in Michelle's memories now, her face all weird and wobbly. But Michelle remembered that it hurt. Bella didn't seem like the type of mommy who would hurt.

Bella didn't know all the rules yet, though. Michelle didn't like foie gras, it felt squishy and wrong in her mouth and every swallow felt like slime. Tėtis said she had a problem with textures. Michelle didn't know much about that, but it meant she got to eat chicken while all the adults ate foie gras, so that was okay. Bella was eyeing Michelle's chicken, though, and Michelle dropped an entire piece right into her lap when Bella asked to skip the course. She'd never seen a grown-up turn down Tėtis's food before.

"Too rich?" Tėtis asked.

"Too cruel," Bella told him, and her face got that funny pinchy look Nina got when she wanted Michelle to stop doing something.

"That's rude," Michelle whispered to her before Tėtis could say anything, shaking her head. She'd tried to be sneaky and secretive about it, but she wasn't very good at whispering.

“Michelle,” Tėtis said sharply, and when she looked up, he was giving her a Look. Michelle was not very good at Looks, but she was very good at Tėtis. They knew each other perfectly, and that was the Look she got when she wasn’t ‘minding her manners.’

“But it is!” Michelle insisted, a little louder now. “You said, you said! You don’t say bad things about what other people make for you.”

“We also don’t correct people’s manners in front of company,” Tėtis reminded her gently. Michelle looked from Tėtis to Jack, who was smiling even though no one had said anything funny, and then to Bella who had a smaller smile just for Michelle. Michelle went very pink and tapped her fingers against her knees, skin hot and tight.

“She’s right, though.” Bella’s voice startled Michelle out of her tense shut down. Michelle looked up at her to find her smile was bigger now. Bella reached out and brushed Michelle’s bangs out of her eyes. “It was very rude of me to say that when Dr. Lecter worked so hard on the meal,” Bella said gently, “Next time, I’ll just say ‘no, thank you,’ and wait for the next course. Do you think that will be better?” Michelle looked at Tėtis. He wasn’t saying anything, or giving Michelle any Looks she could decipher to tell her what she should say. Instead, he was looking at Bella. Michelle was on her own.

“Okay,” Michelle mumbled, swinging her feet a little, “But you gotta say sorry.”

“Of course. I’m sorry, Dr. Lecter.”

Tėtis smiled again. It was his Other People smile, not his smile for Michelle. She liked that he had a special smile just for her. Even if she liked Bella.

“It’s no problem at all. I assure you, I employ a very ethical butcher.”

And then the grown ups were back to talking about grown up things, and whatever big stuffy bubble had been puffing up burst and Michelle could breathe again.

Later, in the bath, Michelle tilted her head back to let Tėtis scrub shampoo through her hair. “Is she sick?” She asked, eyes squeezed shut to keep out the suds.

Tėtis’s hands slowed in their scrubbing, but he didn’t pretend not to know what she meant. Tėtis never pretended Michelle was stupid like other adults did. They didn’t have secrets, her and Tėtis, he talked to her just like he would talk to any grown up. If she was too little to know something, he told her so, but he almost never did that. Tėtis liked Michelle to be smart and grown up, and he didn’t see the point in hiding things just because she was little. Michelle already knew about Bad Things, she wouldn’t un-know them just because a grown up didn’t want to talk about it.

“I believe she is. What led you to ask?”

“You don’t need to lean in to smell perfume.” Michelle peeked at him, making a ledge over her eyes with her hands, blocking the suds away. “You smelled Nina’s cigarettes from the

front doorway, an' she smokes out by the back sliding door. But you smell me when I'm getting a belly ache. And that time I got bron… bron..."

"Bronchitis," Tėtis supplied.

"Bronchitis," Michelle repeated carefully, "I could smell her perfume. You didn't need to hover."

"Rinse," Tėtis said, guiding Michelle's head back. He was quiet as he used a cup to rinse all the suds from her hair, waiting until she was cleaned up and could open her eyes again before he spoke. "Clever little thing," He praised, leaning forward to press a kiss to her forehead. "You've been watching."

Michelle frowned, face scrunching up. "You told me to," She reminded him, "You said it's important to pay attention."

"And yet many of your peers would not have listened."

Michelle stuck her tongue out, making it clear what she thought of her peers. Tėtis had been teaching her how to people watch since the day he'd brought her home. She couldn't always make sense of what she saw, but she always remembered. Most of her classmates couldn't find their own backpacks if the teacher didn't help them. Nobody ever seemed to be *looking*, it was so easy to see things if you just *looked.*

"Tėtis said to pay attention, so I paid attention," Michelle said firmly. That was all there was to it. Tėtis helped her out of the tub, wrapping her tight in a big fluffy towel.

"Bella is sick," He told her, rubbing another towel through her hair. This was the yucky part. Michelle's hair was long now, longer than it had ever been before Tėtis, and it got all tangly when it was wet. "I'm very proud of you for figuring it out."

"Does she know?" Michelle followed Tėtis down the hall to her bedroom, stepping into her fluffy jammies when he held them out for her. She settled onto the bed, Tėtis behind her with the big comb that didn't tug so hard. "Are you gonna tell her?"

"I believe she already knows," He said, pulling the comb gently through her tangles, "However, she may not be ready to speak of it. Do you understand?"

Michelle nodded, flapping her hand against the blankets. "It's hard to talk about the Bad Things sometimes. Gotta wait until people are ready."

"Exactly. We'll keep her secrets, as we keep each others. She wouldn't thank you for asking about it."

"Like Abigail and the hospital."

"Yes, just like Abigail and the hospital." Tėtis had worked his way through all of the tangles now, and was carefully braiding her hair back so it didn't knot up while she slept. Otherwise it dried all funny and she cried when Tėtis had to brush through it in the morning. This was better than combing, it felt good to have someone's hands in her hair, not pulling or tugging

or ripping, just making it nice. Michelle closed her eyes and leaned back against Tėtis once the braid was tied off, snuggling into his chest when he drew her into his arms.

“Won’t talk about it,” She promised, yawning. “But you’ll tell me if it’s bad?”

Tėtis hesitated, which meant it was already bad. Michelle’s tummy twisted all funny. “When Bella is ready to talk about it,” Tėtis finally said, “I promise to tell you what she says.”

That would have to be good enough.

The Port Haven Psychiatric Facility had different rules than the hospital. Children under 12 were allowed to visit so long as a psychiatrist signed off on the visit as being good for the patient’s mental health. Since Alana Bloom was Abigail’s psychiatrist, it hadn’t been difficult for Hannibal to obtain that permission.

“I get visitors every day now,” Abigail said when they arrived in the rec room. She had already pulled out a small stack of board games, though upon seeing Michelle, she relocated Scrabble to the bottom of the pile. “Will was here yesterday.”

Michelle bounded across the room, poking at the boxes Abigail had set aside. “He didn’t wanna come with us?” She asked, looking over her shoulder at Hannibal. Hannibal settled himself into a seat across the table from Abigail, draping his coat across the back of the chair and tugging Michelle close to remove her own coat.

“Will has his own life,” He reminded Michelle, “He can’t always follow our whims.”

Michelle frowned and leaned in to whisper to Abigail, “I’m gonna keep him though, so he can share my life.”

Abigail giggled, tugging at Michelle’s ponytail. “Did you tell Will about this plan yet?”

Michelle shook her head, “Tėtis says people are like birds. If you squeeze too tight, they fly away. You have to be gentle and patient, then they come to you.”

Abigail glanced up at Hannibal. Hannibal could see the calculation in her eyes, thinking him through. “It’s a lot like hunting,” She finally said to Michelle, “You sit and you wait, and eventually the deer come to you.”

Hannibal felt a small flicker of pride for both of his girls. They learned so quickly.

Michelle was always calmer after visiting with Abigail or Will, if a lot more tired. She had outgrown a daily scheduled nap, but she was still young enough to nap on her own if the day was too long or too stressful. By the time Abigail was cleaning up, tucking the board games away, Michelle had migrated to Hannibal’s lap, head resting on his shoulder, eyes closed.

“Thank you for bringing her,” Abigail said softly. “I know you’re busy.”

“We’re never too busy to visit you, Abigail,” Hannibal assured her, “You need only ask if you’re feeling lonely.”

“I’m always feeling lonely,” Abigail admitted, “I don’t fit here. Nothing feels right. I can’t talk to anyone about… About what I can talk to you about.”

Hannibal nodded. “You’ll outgrow this place, soon enough. Alana wants to be sure you are as whole and healthy as you can be before you’re released.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be whole or healthy again,” Abigail said ruefully, tugging at the scarf that hid her scar.

“Perhaps not the way Alana would like you to be,” Hannibal conceded, “But you and I know there are other ways to be whole.”

Abigail looked him over, with a dark, dull gaze that could mark her as Michelle’s sister by blood, not just by circumstance. She looked the way his daughter looked at the peak of a nightmare, when she had just opened her eyes and was still unsure of whether she would have to lash out and kill her monsters all over again.

“They sold the house,” Abigail told him, dropping her gaze to Michelle. Michelle had drifted off, lulled under by the steady rhythm of Hannibal’s breathing, of the safety his even voice assured her of. She was always an easy child, eager to be placated. “I don’t know where I’ll go, if they let me out.”

“*When* they let you out,” Hannibal told her, “Michelle would be more than happy to keep you, as well. There is a place for you, as there is for Will.”

“*Just* Michelle?” Abigail asked him. She looked up at him again, so young and hopeful. She could train well, he knew. She was already primed for his guidance by her father.

“You have a place with us,” Hannibal promised, and when he reached out to cup her face, she let him, cheek resting against the palm of his hand.

The day Will woke up on his own roof, he spent the evening with Hannibal and Michelle.

This was complete coincidence, of course. He’d already had an appointment with Hannibal, and he’d planned to use it to discuss the latest sleepwalking incident. He’d only been awake for half an hour when Hannibal called.

“Hello?”

“*Will. I’m afraid I must ask you a favor.”*

It was a bad idea. It was a *very* bad idea. Will was sleepwalking, for one, although he wasn’t planning to take any naps today, and he was terrible with children, although Michelle seemed

content to ignore that completely.

But on the other hand, Hannibal was always there when Will needed him.

And that was how Will found himself outside Hannibal's office, staring down at Michelle, who stared back up at Will's chin.

"It's just for an hour," Hannibal had assured him, looking more frazzled than *Hannibal Lecter* had any right to look. Apparently, the babysitter had fallen ill at the last possible second. Hannibal had tried to reschedule his clients, but one of them had all but had a fit at the idea of missing their usual appointment time. "Just enough time for this appointment, you won't have to feed her or anything like that. There's a park just down the street. All you need to do is make sure she doesn't break any bones."

And Will, who ignored his self-preservation instincts as a hobby, had agreed to babysit.

"So..." He said, trailing off slightly. Michelle continued to look up at him with that vaguely expectant expression. This was the first time they'd been alone together since the day he met her, and Will found himself struggling just as he had the first time. "Park?"

"Park," Michelle agreed, reaching up expectantly to take his hand.

The park was indeed just down the street, a few short blocks, empty in the chilly winter weather. Michelle was skipping merrily by the time they reached it, tugging him towards the swings when Will tried to take a seat on the bench. "I need you to push me," She demanded, tugging just a bit harder at his hand, "I can't do it myself yet."

"Okay." Will helped her into the swing, pulling her back and letting her go. She giggled, kicking her feet as he pushed her higher. "Do you come here often?"

"No. Nina takes me to the park by our house, though. But she's sick today."

"So I've been told."

"Is Abigail sick?"

Will missed the next push entirely. Michelle looked over her shoulder with a disappointed huff, and he hastened to correct himself, pushing her higher. "Why do you ask?"

"She was in the hospital," Michelle explained, "Because of the monster."

Right. Garrett Jacob Hobbs, the monster Will had supposedly slain.

"She was," Will said carefully, unsure of how much to explain, "She was hurt. She needed to get better."

"Right," Michelle agreed, "Tėtis said. But then she went to the special home. Tėtis took me to visit and it's got funny card locks just like hospitals do."

"Didn't you ask Han- Tėtis about this?"

Michelle shrugged, dragging her feet against the dirt on the next pass until the swing stuttered to a stop. “I know what Tėtis will say. I wanna know what *you* say.”

Will came around the swing, kneeling in front of her. Michelle’s eyes darted all over his face until they found something to linger on. Will took a deep breath, trying to find the words.

“Sometimes… You know what Tėtis’s job is, right?”

Michelle nodded, “He helps people’s brains. He’s a brain doctor. But not like, cutting them open and poking their brains.”

“That’s right. Sometimes people are sick in another way, not the kind of sick you can take medicine or get surgery for. And that’s okay! It’s nobody’s fault if they get sick. But it means they need special help, like your Tėtis, or Abigail’s special home.”
Michelle frowned, face scrunching up. “But *why?”*

“Because life is hard,” Will said bluntly, “Because sometimes bad things happen, and it can take a really long time to move past that, even if they aren’t happening anymore.”

“Flashbacks,” Michelle summed up, “And night terrors. Triggers.”

“That’s right. You’re so smart.” Will smiled at her, reaching out to ruffle her hair. She batted his hand away with a tiny smile of her own.

“They’re Tėtis’s words. When I...” She stopped, looked away. Something darkened her face, turned down the emotion in her eyes until they looked blank. “We talked a lot when I moved in.”

Right. They would have had to, because of what Michelle had been through. What she’d seen. Will wasn’t surprised to learn she had nightmares.

“Abigail’s gonna get better though, right?” Michelle looked back at him, actually held his gaze for a long minute. Will felt torn between honesty and hopefulness. Maybe she wouldn’t. Maybe Abigail would grow up to be like him, forever broken by the past.

“Yeah,” Will said, “She’s gonna be just fine.”

Michelle beamed, throwing herself off the swing and into Will’s arms. Will held her for a long moment and thought of fresh strawberries in summer heat. Then she hopped back, all smiles and laughter once more.

“Wanna see what I can do?”

It was like the conversation had never happened. Michelle was off like a shot, scrambling across playground equipment like a little monkey, barely impeded by her bad leg. She climbed just as well as any other child would have, scaling the wooden structures in quick, practiced motions. “Careful,” Will called, as she made her way to the monkey bars. Will expected her to swing across. Instead, she clamored to stand atop them, one leg bent back to keep herself flat footed.

“Look!”

The monkey bars were barely Will’s height, he could not have walked back and forth beneath them without banging his head off of every bar. It was still far too high for someone who didn’t even reach Will’s hips.

“No, get down from there.” Will walked beside her, arms out to catch her in case she fell. “Your Tėtis will actually kill me.”

Michelle shook her head, balancing one careful step in front of the other. She wobbled gracelessly, lacking the right stance to balance properly. “I can do it! I saw another kid do it last time, I can do it too.”

It wasn’t that Will wanted to call her out on it, to say there were some things she just couldn’t do because of her leg. That didn’t seem fair, or right. Why shouldn’t she be treated like any other kid? But the bottom line was, she couldn’t keep sure footed with one awkwardly twisted ankle, not the way another child might have. As she reached the end, reaching out for the wooden beams of the play castle, her bent foot slid off the bars, and she flew forward. Will managed to catch her before she could smack her head against the wood, but she slid down with him to the ground, scraping her knees against the edges of the structure. She let out a surprised, pained wail, flailing in his grip as they tumbled into the mulch.

“Fuck,” Will hissed under his breath, the back of his head scraping painfully against the base of the play castle. He had managed to land with Michelle on his lap, shielded from the worst of the impact, and now he struggled into a sitting position, hushing Michelle’s upset whimpering. “Shh, hey, it’s okay. Let me see, show me where it hurts.” Hannibal really was going to kill him.

Will carefully looked Michelle over, even as she squirmed and fussed in his arms like a much smaller child. Thankfully, she didn’t seem to have any bruises or scrapes around her skull, no broken bones, just some rips in her jeans around the knees, a little bit of blood where she’d scraped the skin. Hannibal was likely to have a first aid kit, the worst of it would just be checking for splinters. “Okay, let’s take a look.” He reached for the cuff of Michelle’s jeans, starting to slide them up.

“No!”

Michelle turned and hauled off, smacking little hands against his chest, shrieking at the top of her lungs. “No, no, don’t touch!”

“Hey, hey, we don’t hit,” Will replied, grabbing for her wrists. She shrieked again, a wordless outrage, and caught him across the face, shoving herself out of his lap. It was more sound than pain; Michelle didn’t have enough strength to truly hurt him. Still, Will cupped the red mark on his cheek, reaching for her with his free hand.

“Don’t touch!” She repeated, scrambling back in an awkward crab walk. She laid there in the wood chips, chest heaving with heavy panting, eyes wide and unseeing, arms crossed in front of her so she could frantically smack her hands against her arms.

“Hey, shh...” Will realized his mistake immediately. Even in her uniform skirts, Michelle wore knee socks that neatly covered her from shoe to thigh, hiding away the twist of her ankle. Now, she whimpered, drawing herself up until she could shift the leg under her, hiding it from view. Will shifted to his knees, holding his hands up where Michelle could see them.

“It’s alright,” He whispered, slow and quiet, “I’m not going to touch you. Nobody is going to touch you if you don’t want them to. You’re safe here, with me.”

Slowly, Michelle’s breathing evened out, and she seemed to come back to herself, face red with exertion and misery. She looked at Will’s hands, eyes twitching back and forth between them.

“You’re safe,” Will repeated, “I just want to look at your scrapes, but you don’t have to show me if you don’t want to. We can go back to the office, and Tėtis can fix you up, okay?”

Michelle nodded slowly, sniffling as tears welled up in her eyes. Will pushed just a little further.

“But it’s okay if you *do* show me, you know that, right? I’m not going to be angry with you, or upset. There’s nothing you can tell me that’s going to make me treat you differently.”

Michelle shook her head, whining wordlessly, a miserable little sound that made Will ache.

“Look,” He said, drawing the collar of his shirt aside. The old stab wound rested along his shoulder, right through muscles that would never be the same. It had healed years ago, no longer the fresh pink of a new scar, now just white, raised swirls on his skin. “See? I have old injuries. I can’t rotate my arm the way everyone else can. Sometimes it’s a little harder for me to do my job, because my arm won’t let me. Do you like me less now?”

Michelle took him in, the way the scar tissue shifted down his body in little ripples. She moved slowly, crawling forward until she could rest the palm of her hand over the scar. “No,” She said softly, with something like hope etching its way across her tiny features. She leaned back, sitting up and slowly drawing her foot in front of her, wincing slightly. Hands shaking, she grabbed the leg of her jeans and tugged it up.

Will was thankful for his experience in law enforcement, a marathon of things he wished he hadn’t seen that nevertheless had trained him to keep his face still and steady. As this wisp of a girl sat before him, tiny and frail and in need of protection, he wanted nothing more than to step into her past and crush her demons himself. Slowly, Michelle brought her jeans up until the scrape at her knee was visible, along with every inch of rippling skin beneath.

The burn was extensive. It sprawled from just below her knee, down to her ankle, disappearing into her sock and no doubt continuing on to her foot. The waves and ridges were warped, stretched from years of growing, and the bones of her ankle jutted awkwardly out of place, a break that had never been set properly, that had been allowed to heal wrong and cause Michelle pain the rest of her life.

Will didn’t acknowledge it, did not gasp or cry or yell. He fixed his eyes on the scrape in her knee, checking for splinters or any slices that might need stitches. Satisfied that it was just a

scrape, he tapped at her other leg. “This one too.”

Michelle hesitated, clearly expecting some sort of comment, and then drew up the other leg. This one had bled a little more, the scrape a little wider, but nothing that a doctor would need to see to. Will helped her guide her jeans back into place.
“You’ll live,” He said with a forced smile, “We just need to get you back to the office and clean them up a bit. Do you want me to carry you?”

Michelle nodded, twisting her hands on her lap. Will hoisted her up into his arms, settling her onto his hip and pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Alright. Your Tėtis will be expecting us anyway.”

It was a short walk, but it was long enough for Michelle to press her face against his shoulder, unusually quiet. Just as the office came into view, she started to talk, voice muffled against his shirt.

“I wasn’t supposed to be in the kitchen,” She mumbled, hands flapping rhythmically against Will’s chest, “The stove is hot. Mommy said to go away, but I wanted to help. Daddy got mad, because I wasn’t listening. He said I’d learn to listen. I was supposed to stay still, but it hurt, and he had to hold me down because I wouldn’t be good.” A shaky breath hissed out against his throat. Will tightened his grip, clinging tighter to Michelle.

“Thank you for telling me,” He finally said, when Michelle settled back into silence. “You know that wasn’t your fault, don’t you?”

“Tėtis said. And he said it’ll get better. He says I’m young enough to learn how to work around it. I had to go to a special walking doctor.”

“Tėtis is right. He usually is, but don’t tell him I said that.”

“I won’t.”

Hannibal was at the door when they arrived, gathering his things and clearly preparing to come and get them. He took one look at Michelle and pulled her into his arms, fussing over her scrapes.

“I’m sorry,” Will said sheepishly. Hannibal shook his head.

“Children fall, Will. That’s not your fault. She’ll have more scrapes under my watch, I promise you that.”

Michelle squirmed in his arms, reaching down to her jeans. She shoved the leg up over her burn, without any hesitation this time. “Will says we have to clean it.”

Hannibal paused, looking from the scar tissue, up to Will, who shrugged self-consciously.

“Will is right,” Hannibal told Michelle, “But we’ll clean you up at home. Come, it’s almost time for dinner.”

“Is Will going to join us?”

Hannibal looked up at Will. Will nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m coming, kiddo.”

“Yay!”

Will walked them to the car, watching Hannibal settle Michelle into her car seat. He shoved his hands in his pockets, mostly to have something to do with them. Once Michelle was buckled and the door was closed, shutting her off from them, Hannibal turned.

“She told you.”

“She did,” Will agreed, staring down at the sidewalk. Out of the corner of his eye, he was startled to find that Hannibal was smiling.

“Congratulations, Will. You’re a member of a very exclusive club. You, myself, and her Nina.”

Will blushed, shrugging. “Sometimes it feels good to talk about these things.” He straightened up, looking up at Hannibal’s face. “I’m glad they’re dead,” He whispered, before he could stop himself. Michelle’s parents deserved it. Will only wished it hadn’t been so quick. A part of him wished he could have done it himself.

Hannibal looked at him, that steady, studious look he seemed to reserve only for Will. “So am I.” He said, and somehow, Will felt like they shared those darker thoughts between the two of them. It felt right.

Later, when dinner was over and Will had been seen out, Hannibal tucked Michelle into bed and knelt beside it, holding her tiny hands in his.

“You were my very brave girl today, weren’t you?” He asked. Michelle smiled sleepily.

“Will didn’t ask,” She said, “So he got to know.”

“A sensible decision.”

“I think he’s going to take care of us, Tėtis”

“Do you?”

Michelle nodded, yawning. “I think he wants to, anyway?”

His clever little one. Hannibal suspected she was right. He’d meant to attach Will to them, but he’d been unprepared for how well Will had taken to it. Emergency or no emergency, there were very few people he would have trusted Michelle’s care to. That Michelle trusted Will as well only enforced Hannibal’s beliefs. There would be trials ahead, things that would strain Will to the breaking point, but Hannibal had faith that he and Michelle could piece him back together, the way he was meant to be.

“Tėtis,” Michelle asked, breaking him from his thoughts, “What does sick smell like?”

Hannibal thought of Bella, of the hint of a sour tumor. Then of Will, and the sweet heat that had lingered over him at dinner tonight. “It’s like people. Every illness smells different.”

“Do I smell sick like Abigail is sick?”

Michelle was no stranger to therapy, to the need for psychiatric care, but before Abigail, Hannibal had hoped they were past this. He leaned in, pressing his lips to Michelle’s cheek and taking in a loud, exaggerated sniff that left her giggling.

“You smell like chocolate mousse and shampoo,” He reassured her, pulling the covers tight around her shoulders, “And like our family, our home together.”

“You and Abigail and Will?”

Hannibal smiled, one half affection, one half pride. “Is it time to include them in our family?”

Michelle frowned, eyes drifting closed. “Don’t be silly, Tėtis. They’re already here.”

Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warnings For This Chapter: Descriptions of previous child abuse and damage from it, panic attacks, more manipulative!Hannibal.

Not much to say about this chapter, except that now we know all of Michelle's secrets. Or at least, all of the more obvious ones...

Usually I post on Mondays and Thursdays, however, I'm going to be away until Monday, and it's unlikely I'll have time to write. Next week, there will likely only be one chapter posted, and not until Wednesday or Thursday. Sorry guys!

Next time: There is no canon interaction between Will and Hannibal in Entree, so the author has to make some up. Also, *Michelle Elizabeth Lecter cordially invites you to celebrate her eighth birthday,* and Hannibal has the serial killer version of a temper tantrum.

Celebrations

Chapter Notes

No real warnings here but some of Hannibal's internal thoughts are a little creepy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"*What do you know about Dr. Fredrick Chilton?"*

Hannibal paused, grip tightening around the phone. "An interesting greeting, Will."

A beat, then, *"Hello, Hannibal. What do you know about Fredrick Chilton?"*

Hannibal hummed softly. "Better, but it could still use some improvement," Hannibal couldn't see Will through the phone of course, but he could imagine well the flush to his cheeks, "Very little, I'm afraid," Hannibal continued, "Dr. Chilton and I are colleagues, but we rarely find ourselves in each other's company."

Will snorted and muttered something that was no doubt quite rude. Hannibal, who found himself regularly thinking rude thoughts in Fredrick's general direction, chose to let it slide.

"*He thinks he has the Chesapeake Ripper locked up in his hospital."*

Hannibal's fist clenched. He found himself grateful for the sturdiness of modern mobile phones; he likely would have shattered an old, plastic land line. "I was not aware an arrest had been made."

"*He thinks it's someone he already had in custody. Did you ever read about Dr. Gideon's case?"*

"He murdered his wife, correct?"

"*And his in-laws*," Will confirmed, *"They're the only violence he's ever been convicted of. No priors, and he's been locked up ever since."*

Yes, Hannibal knew the details of the case. If Hannibal's work was a Botticelli, Dr. Abel Gideon was scribbling away in a coloring book. He was insipid and uninspired. Just an ordinary man who had lost his grip and taken it out on his family. *Plebeian.*

"Dr. Gideon's previous work doesn't fit the profile."

"*His latest does,"* Will said, with very little conviction.

"Another body?"

"*I'm surprised it hasn't leaked yet. The Wound Man, a perfect replica, the next supposed kill from a man who never paints the same exact picture twice."*

"And one anyone who had studied medical texts sufficiently would be able to produce."

"*That's what I said!"*

"So you don't believe Gideon to be the Chesapeake Ripper?"

Will took in a deep breath. "*I believe… that* ***Gideon*** *believes he is the Chesapeake Ripper. But there's something missing. It's not right, it's hollow. It's the generic, dollar store brand of an expensive luxury item. It gets the job done, but it's still a cheap imitation."*

Will really was utterly brilliant. Hannibal felt an unfamiliar flicker of affection. To be seen would be a disaster, right now, would mean the end of everything he worked for. But to have Will look at Gideon's scribbles and see them as Hannibal's own art would have been somehow worse.

"I take it Dr. Chilton did not agree with your assessment?"
"*How did you guess?"* Will asked with a wry laugh, *"No, he needs this to be true. One more toy for him to collect."* Will's voice trailed off into an uncomfortable silence; Hannibal could only imagine how that meeting had gone.

"Did he attempt to collect *you*, Will?"
Will's breath stuttered. Hannibal imagined he could see the tense set of his shoulders, the way he hunched in on himself when nervous.

"*Apparently I'm 'quite the topic of interest.'"*

"As your friend, I feel I should be outraged on your behalf."

"*There's a 'but' coming isn't there?"*

"But, as your friend, I also feel a bit of pride for you."

Will laughed. *"Well, let's stow the pride for now. I have no desire to let myself be collected by any psychiatrists. Not even you, Hannibal."*

"Of course not, Will. I wouldn't dream of it." After all, how could Hannibal collect that which walked willingly into his home? Will had collected himself, and Hannibal was merely reaping the benefits.

Invitations were hard. Super duper hard!

Tėtis had given her one of his to work off of, and had carefully spelled out each and every word with big letters so she could do it herself, but it was still hard. There were lots of big words and she kept having to start over because the paper wasn't big enough.

“Are you sure you don’t want help?” Nina peeked at her over the edge of her phone, pretty blue nails tap-tapping away at the screen. Michelle looked up from her craft table and shook her head.

“I have to do it! It’s *my* party!”

“Doesn’t Dr. Lecter hire a bunch of people to help with his own parties?”

Michelle shook her head, carefully pressing a glittery flower sticker to the invitation she was working on. “That’s just sous chefs. They help with food prep and clean up. Tėtis does all the before stuff himself, including fancy invitations.”

“Michelle,” Nina said, smiling, “They’re still going to come, even if the invitations aren’t perfect.”

Michelle shrugged, not entirely believing that. Will and Abigail were new. They were shy like when Michelle had been new and didn’t know Dr. Lecter was going to be Tėtis. Maybe they wouldn’t come if she didn’t ask right. “I want them to be perfect,” She finally said, signing her name at the bottom, “There, this one’s yours. I’m not gonna mail it because that’s silly.”

Nina laughed, holding out her hand to take the invitation and reading it carefully. “’Michelle Elizabeth Lecter cordially invites you to celebrate her eighth birthday on January 27th. Dinner will be served at six, dessert to follow. Please RSVP no later than January 24th.’ That’s pretty soon, are you going to have time to mail these out?”

Michelle shook her head. “Tėtis will hand them out for me.”

“So who are we inviting?”

Michelle held up her fingers. “Me and Tėtis. You. Then Abigail and Will. Plus Dr. Bloom ‘cause Abigail needs her permission.” Nina hadn’t met Abigail and Will yet, but Michelle had made sure to tell her all about them, so she would be prepared.

Nina frowned at her, though. “No kids from school? What about Shannon, from Judo lessons, I thought you liked her?”

Michelle shrugged, looking down at her next sheet of paper. The kids at school were stupid. They probably didn’t even know what a sous-chef was, or how to play the harpsichord, or any of the cool stuff Michelle was learning to do. She didn’t need them. “I got orange belt and she didn’t ‘cause she isn’t even listening half the time. Not my fault I know how to do stuff ‘cause I pay attention. She told me it wasn’t fair that I got moved up ‘cause I can’t even do the stances right.” Glancing up, Michelle saw Nina’s face was doing the funny pinchy thing it usually did right before she got angry. Michelle hastened to finish the story. “S’okay though because we got paired up and I threw her real hard.”

Nina sighed, closing her eyes for a minute. “Okay. Alright, so no more Shannon?”

“No more Shannon,” Michelle agreed, sprinkling some glitter over the edges of the paper.

“Alright. I can work with that. Winter won’t last forever, we can start going to the park again. Maybe… Ooh, what if we did some craft classes together? You like crafts, and Dr. Lecter is happy to pay for anything educational.”

Michelle shrugged. “I like doing crafts here with you though.”

“Michelle,” Nina said, for what was beginning to feel like the millionth time, “I’m 26 years old. You are fantastic, little mouse, and I adore you, but I can’t be your only friend forever.”

“You’re not my only friend,” Michelle said stiffly, “Abigail and Will are my friends. Tėtis is my friend.”

Nina stood up from the couch, coming to kneel by Michelle’s craft table. She pulled Michelle into her arms, arranging her gently in her lap when Michelle tried to go still like a statue.

“We’re your friends,” Nina agreed, “And I’m not going to stop being your friend. But I won’t be in grad school forever.”

“No, but then you can get your doctorate.”

Nina laughed against the crown of Michelle’s head. “Yeah, okay, so I’ll be here a few more years. But not forever. You need friends your own age.”

“Kids my age suck.” This was not something she was allowed to say in front of Tėtis, but she knew Nina would let her, and sure enough, Nina snickered.

“Yeah, they kinda do. You all outgrow it eventually, I promise. But in the meantime, you need to try and tolerate them, okay?”

Michelle sighed. “Okay.”

Nina nudged Michelle back to the floor, setting up across the craft table from her. “Let’s practice, okay? Show me a face. Show me… Happy.”

Happy was easy. Michelle smiled broadly at Nina, fixing her eyes on the bridge of her nose.

“Very good! Okay, my turn.” Nina took a deep breath, straightening up and looking at Michelle. Her brow furrowed and the corners of her mouth turned down. Michelle looked her over and frowned.

“Uh… Sad?”

“Not quite,” Nina told her, “Although people *can* be sad when they feel this way.”

Not sad. Probably not angry, angry was all in the eyes. “...Nervous?” Michelle finally tried. Nina applauded, grinning.

“Awesome, little mouse, great job. People get tense when they’re nervous or anxious. You’ll see it right here,” Nina trailed a finger across Michelle’s forehead, and Michelle giggled,

“And they might bite their lips or fidget with their hands. What do we do when people are nervous?”

“Don’t make it worse,” Michelle replied quickly, “Indoor voices. Talk slow, don’t touch unless you’re asked. Ask if you can do anything to help. Listen to the answer.”

“High five,” Nina cheered, holding out her palm. Michelle smacked it eagerly, flapping her hand to ease the sting afterwards. They went through a few more faces. Michelle could do ‘angry’ and recognized ‘shy’ with a little bit of help, but she got stuck on ‘bored.’ She always got stuck on ‘bored,’ it was just so flat. Finally, they moved on to scenarios. This was always harder because there was no one-word right answer.

“Alright, now, you’re at the park, and some kid starts making fun of your stims, flapping his arms and laughing .What do you do?”

“Find an adult,” The answer came automatically, the situation was not as hypothetical as either of them would have liked, “Don’t tattle because that makes bullies worse, but play around an adult because he won’t do it in front of them.”

“That’s right. And if there’s no adults anywhere and it’s just you and this kid?”
Michelle thought for a moment and then started to giggle, carefully folding her fingers down until just the middle one remained, flipping Nina off. “And then I go play by myself because I’m too cool for him.”

“That’s my girl! And if Tètis finds out and asks who taught you that?”

“I tell him Shannon’s mommy let us watch Youtube unsupervised.”

Nina held out her hand for another high five. Michelle smacked it as hard as she could. “A+, little mouse. You’ve got this.”

Hannibal had been mentally prepare for Chilton’s gloating, of course, thanks to Will’s call, but the article was something else entirely. He knew Will didn’t believe Gideon to be the Chesapeake Ripper, and Jack was likely to go wherever his blood hound pointed him, but Freddie Lounds lacked moral integrity or any desire to make sure she had her facts straight. She would write whatever got her readers, and that she had FBI backing for this only made her more eager.

Will had told Hannibal, of course, what they were doing. He’d been in a bit of a rage about it himself; jumping into bed with Freddie Lounds was the worst way Will could think of to spend his day. Hannibal was pleased that Will immediately turned to him when something was bothering him. He was less pleased that they had gone ahead with their plan anyway, and now he was forced to read Freddie Lounds’s over-the-top narrative of his art with Abel Gideon’s signature.

The FBI wanted to lure out the Chesapeake Ripper, if he was indeed still free. Will, with his intimate knowledge of most killers, knew the best way to do that was to go straight for the Ripper’s pride. He believed the Ripper would be unable to resist claiming his work.

And even though it was objectively good for Hannibal that people believe Gideon was the Ripper, even though Hannibal had been explicitely told what the plan was, and was not so simple as to have not figured it out on his own anyway… It was working.

They wanted the Ripper, fine. Hannibal would show them the Ripper.

The house on the cliff was too high. It always made Michelle nervous when they came here. It was a nice house, she guessed. She liked the big big windows and listening to the water, but there was no fence around the edge of the cliff. She was not supposed to walk to the edge, but sometimes it felt like the dizzy height called her name, sinking deep into her chest and tugging. Like if she didn't look down to see the waves, there would be something more terrifying lurking out of her sight.

"Michelle!"

Tėtis called her in from the doorway, frowning at how close she stood to the edge. Michelle hurried after him, letting herself be settled in at the kitchen table. Tėtis had packed snacks, grapes and apples and a big bottle of water, and as she munched he laid out her crayons and papers, adding a little stack of books to the end of the table.

"What are the rules?" He asked her, stealing one of her grapes. She pouted at him, swiping an apple slice from his plate in retaliation.

"Table or bathroom," Michelle recited, "Nowhere else. Don't answer the door. Don't answer the phone. "

"Good,"Tėtis praised, "Anything else?"

He never asked that if she'd gotten them all, but it was her least favorite rule, and every time, Michelle hoped he would forget it. "Don't make a sound," She said, frowning down at her plate.

"Clever little thing," Tėtis praised, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I know it's not fun, but I'm so proud that you can behave for me like this. I would much rather bring you with me than leave you at home alone."

That sent a thrum of warmth through Michelle's chest. She liked being included in Tėtis's secrets, in his trips. She liked getting to help a little more every year. "Me too, Tėtis," She said, leaning forward to tap her fingers against his shoulder. He took the affection for what it was, grabbing her hand and kissing the back of it like a fairytale. Michelle giggled and swung her feet.

"Ready?" Tėtis asked. Michelle nodded and mimed zipping her lips.

The house was soundproofed, every room carefully arranged for privacy. The house was soundproofed, and Tėtis closed every door between Michelle and his room and the basement.

The house was soundproofed, but nothing was perfect, and if Michelle listened very hard, she could hear the slightest whisper creep up through the floorboards.

Michelle did not listen very hard. She ate her snack and followed every rule her Tėtis gave her.

In anyone else, he might have called it childish. Certainly, the desire to show off was one Hannibal often saw mimicked in his daughter. But he had worked hard for his legacy, to leave his imprint on this world. He would not be glossed over so easily, would not be replaced by cattle.

The phone call was the hardest part, and then only for the level of stealth it required. Hannibal had kept the recording at hand, ready for whenever he might need it. It gave him a thrill to stand in Jack's bedroom, gently laying out a long, blonde hair. He could imagine the look on Jack Crawford's face, the way he would yell and fuss.

The arm might as well have been child's play in comparison. It was much simpler to break into the observatory, laying out Jack's little gift. Hannibal felt a moment of compassion for Miriam. He would sedate her as well as he could in the next few weeks, but it was likely the pain would occasionally trickle in. She'd been so sweet and trusting when he told her he was taking the arm, so pliant in her daze. He would have to reward her, somehow. Perhaps some new music to play in her hazy state. She was rarely conscious enough to express any sort of pleasure, but Hannibal thought she would like that.

Hannibal felt no guilt, no shame. He was not capable. This was Jack's fault. He should have known better than to push someone known for violence and instability. Now he'd upped the stakes, and Hannibal was quite content to keep playing the game.

Will was having a hell of a week. Ghost phone calls, severed limbs, *Freddie Lounds*. The last thing he wanted was to be standing on Hannibal's porch in neatly pressed pants and a *tie*, because Hannibal had insisted the party be treated as a formal dinner party.

"Her *arm*," Will muttered to himself, ringing the doorbell, "Her fucking *arm,* why was he just keeping that around for two years?"

He didn't have any more time to worry about the case. Michelle threw the front door open with a delighted shriek. "You came!"

"Of course I came," Will insisted, although truth be told, he had considered staying home. It was the invitation that did him in, Michelle's careful, 2nd grade scrawl spelling out words like 'cordially' in big blue crayon. There'd even been a dog sticker. It had glittered. "I wouldn't miss your birthday," Will continued, handing over his present. He hadn't braved Target again, instead buckling down and asking Hannibal for a suggestion. Hopefully the paint set would go over better than the Easy-Bake oven had.

Michelle hugged the package to her chest, ushering him in. “Look, Tėtis got me a party dress! Do you like it?” He did. It was purple and sparkly, like most of Michelle’s things, but otherwise looked like a very tiny version of an adult woman’s dinner party outfit, with thick stockings covering her legs. Less impressive was the knitted hat, gray with little pink mouse ears, that had been smashed haphazardly onto her hair.

“That’s certainly an interesting look you have there.”

“Nina made me a hat! Oh! You can meet my Nina!” Michelle spun in the entry way, already running down the hall while Will was still trying to work off his shoes. “Nina!” She shrieked. A young woman in a green cocktail dress poked her head out of a doorway.

“Indoor voices,” The woman lectured, even as Michelle grabbed her hand and pulled her down the hall. The woman offered Will a smile and a hand shake. “You must be Will Graham.”

The woman had a youthful face and dark hair, but her hair was wavy, her eyes dark and skin a warm bronze. She had to be at least mid twenties. In short, she looked not a damn thing like Abigail Hobbs, but there was only one person she could have been.
“You must be Nina…?” Will trailed off. Nina was the only name he’d ever been given.

“Nina Ruiz,” Nina finished for him with a wry smile, “The babysitter, and best friend,” She added when Michelle looked ready to correct her. “I’ve heard all about you, of course. With how the little mouse talks about you, I figured you’d ride in on a white horse all in armor.”

Will could feel his cheeks flushing a very deep shade of pink. Michelle missed the teasing entirely, frowning up at Nina.

“Why would Will ride a horse here,” She asked, “We don’t have anywhere to put it?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be helping with something?” Nina told her, nudging her towards the kitchen, “I doubt Mr. Graham wants to stand in the hallway all night.”

“He’s just Will,” Michelle told her seriously, switching from Nina’s free hand to Will’s and tugging. “C’mon, Will! It’s a dinner party just like Tėtis’s.”

Will glanced at Nina with a raised eyebrow. Nina shrugged.

“Believe it or not, it was her idea. I was gonna take her to Chuck-E-Cheese. You can bet Dr. Lecter didn’t fight her on it, though.”

Oh yes, cardboard pizza in a noisy arcade or an intimate dinner with his closest friends? Will could easily see which would appeal to Hannibal.

Hannibal was already wrist deep in a bowl, carefully seasoning a prime cut of meat. Abigail hovered next to him, chopping vegetables and occasionally asking questions, while Alana leaned against the island and sipped at a beer. For such an assortment of people, it was surprisingly cozy.

“Ah, Will, you’re here!” Hannibal let the food rest, turning to greet Will with a smile. Smiles seemed to come easier to him now, to both of them actually, as Will couldn’t help but to return it.

“I said I would. Need any help?”

“We’re almost finished,” Abigail chimed in, gesturing to her cutting board, “We’re having-”

“No!” Michelle interrupted, bouncing on her toes and squeezing Will’s hand in her grasp. “I can do it! I planned the menu,” She added, grinning up at Will. “An’ I helped cook until you got here, and I set the table and picked the centerpiece. It’s my party. I’m the hostess.”

“Go ahead, then,” Will encouraged, kneeling down so she didn’t have to crane her neck so far back, “Tell me about your menu.”

Michelle chewed on her lower lip, thinking it over for a long minute before she began to recite. “A simple Ceaser salad to start. Then Beef loin in a garlic-infused red sauce, with Rosemary and Thyme seasoned and roasted broccolini. Then cake for dessert, because you gotta have regular birthday cake on a birthday.” She nodded along with her own words, and then brightened. “Oh! And mac & cheese, but not from a box because Tėtis says there have to be *some* limits.” Over her shoulder, Hannibal looked pained, but he nodded.

“We did, in fact, make some mac & cheese,” Hannibal told him, the words as awkward on his tongue as the menu had been on Michelle’s, “And I was not permitted to add tomatoes, or any special seasonings, although I did win the argument for baking it.”

“It’s my birthday,” Michelle whispered to Will loudly, “Hostess picks the menu.”

Abigail started to giggle, and Will couldn’t help but grin himself. He tugged Michelle forward into a hug, hoisting her up with him when she wrapped around his torso. “You’re in luck, then, because I love mac & cheese, and all we ever had growing up was the box.”

“I think I was sixteen before I realized you could make it from scratch,” Nina offered up, leaning over to tug on Michelle’s hat. “Alright, little mouse, table manners. Do we wear hats at the table?”

“No,” Michelle replied dutifully, shoving the hat off her head and handing it over. Her hair stuck up every which way, baby-soft and therefor prone to tangles. Hannibal opened his mouth to say something, then turned back to his food in silence, clearly attempting to hold his tongue in honor of Michelle’s birthday. Abigail, finished with the vegetables, had no such qualms. She left the sink to join Will, tutting softly.

“Why don’t we fix this up for you, birthday girl?”

Michelle nodded, but when Will went to shift her into Abigail’s arms, she clung. “But Will just got here!”

“Will can come too,” Abigail assured her, grinning up at him, “Can’t you, Will?”

“Yeah,” Will found himself saying, and that was how he found himself seated on Michelle’s bed, Michelle in his lap while Abigail carefully combed out her tangles.

“Like you,” Michelle insisted, tugging at the hem off Abigail’s dress, “So we can match.” Indeed, Abigail had also worn a purple dress, with a matching scarf. Will wondered if it had been Hannibal’s idea. It seemed like the sort of thing he would suggest, with how fond Michelle was of Abigail.

“A braid?” Abigail asked, tugging at the end of her own.

“Right down the side,” Michelle agreed with a nod. Carefully, Will maneuvered her in his lap so Abigail could properly reach her hair. Abigail plaited the strands with deft fingers, until Michelle’s hair looped in a long braid over her shoulder. Michelle tugged at it in wonder, one hand on her own braid, and one hand on Abigail’s. She looked up at Will, grinning.

“Beautiful,” Will assured her, then looked up at Abigail and repeated the sentiment. Abigail flushed pink, pleased, and for a moment, things felt safe and secure. Will had expected to feel like an intruder. Instead, he felt a bit like a guard dog, like a knight protecting princesses. It was an odd feeling, but not unpleasant.

Then the moment broke. Alana knocked on the door, an odd, pinched smile on her face. “Hannibal says it’s time to wash up for dinner.”

Reminded of her party, Michelle squirmed in Will’s lap, pushing at his arms until she could bounce her way to the floor. “Hurry, hurry,” She demanded of them all, nudging at Alana’s legs. Alana let her and Abigail pass, then met Will with a hand on his shoulder.

“They’ve gotten very attached to you,” Alana said softly. There was a look on her face that Will, for all his empathy, could not read, some confused mix of pride and worry.

“Lonely people draw other lonely people,” Will said with a shrug, “And Michelle gets very attached to *everybody*.”

“She’s not quite so attached to me,” Alana said, with a disgruntled frown that was more easily interpreted, “I get the impression I’m intruding. I think she thinks it’s my fault Abigail doesn’t come more often.”

“Isn’t it?” The words slipped out before Will could stop them. He managed a sheepish, guilty expression under Alana’s stare. “I didn’t meant that the way it sounded.”

“I’m struggling to think of another way you could have meant it,” Alana told him, but it didn’t sound as cold as it might have. She sighed, rubbing at her temples. “You’re not wrong. Abigail wants to be here more often than not. I think she’d live here, if we let her. Did you know Michelle visits her almost every day? If Hannibal doesn’t bring her, Nina does. You’d think Abigail would want to talk to someone closer to her own age, but Nina just sits in the corner on her phone while Michelle and Abigail play together.”

“They’re like sisters, sometimes,” Will suggested. Alana looked less pleased with this than Will thought was warranted.

“I’m glad Abigail has people who care about her,” She said, slow and cautious in her wording, “But she’s in a rough place right now. She has a lot of wounds to heal, and instead of working on healing, she’s distracting herself, running away from her problems.”

“Hannibal isn’t going to let her crash.”

“Hannibal is a wonderful psychiatrist, but he’s also a father. He has a father’s weaknesses, the desire to protect his children.”

“Don’t we all?”

Alana bit her lip, stepped aside to let Will out of the room. “It’s not just Abigail’s health I worry about,” She said softly, “Are you and Michelle ready to take on someone else’s trauma?” Will paused. Alana had known Hannibal longer than he had, had most likely been there when Michelle first came to stay.

“Thank you for your concern,” Will finally said, “But Abigail’s trauma *is* my trauma. And none of us would let anyone hurt Michelle.”

Dinner was fun! Michelle sat next to Tėtis, still at the head of the table (He’d offered it to Michelle as the hostess but that was Tėtis’s spot and it made Michelle feel itchy and wrong to think about moving the seats so much), with Abigail on her other side and Will across from her. Next to Will, Nina had lulled Dr. Bloom into a conversation about schoolwork. Nina’s school work was too complicated for Michelle, so instead she busied herself with being a good hostess. She had helped Tėtis plate everyone’s meals, walking them out to the table with careful steps. She’d had to let Tėtis pour the beverages, but he let her hold the bottles with him, strong hands guiding her little ones until she felt so very grown up, like it was truly her own dinner party.

Tėtis had been pleased when he saw her hair, tugging at the end of her braid. He liked that she matched Abigail, she could tell. And Will would look between them with this funny smile on his face that Michelle wanted to see again and again.

They sang happy birthday to her, even though nobody ever did that at one of Tėtis’s parties, and Abigail played with her in the family room while the adults drank wine and talked. Michelle tried to stay awake as long as she could to see all of her guests out, but by the time Nina was gone and Dr. Bloom was shrugging her coat on, she had started to wilt, all the sugar-based energy under her skin slowly draining out.

“You come back,” She insisted to Abigail, and then again when Will drifted into her line of sight.

“Of course we’ll come back,” Abigail promised, handing her off to Will to free her arms up for her coat.

Michelle pressed her face to Will’s chest and breathed in the scent of soap and cologne, and something hot and sweet that she couldn’t quite grasp, and let her eyes drift closed.

Will was the last guest left, held in place by Michelle's sleepy but firm grip on his collar. He rocked her gently, stiff but steady. She made a soft, pleased sound, a huff of breath against his collarbone, and let her eyes close. Hannibal watched them with a strange pleasure in his chest, unfamiliar and eager.
"My apologies, Will," Hannibal said, reaching for her, "Usually she's in bed by 8:30, but with all the excitement..."

Handing her over was challenging. Michelle clung, even in sleep, and had to be gently detached from Will's shirt. He looked suddenly adrift without her. Hannibal found himself with a sudden, unexpected desire to give her back.

"She's a good kid," Will said, clearing his throat.

"I certainly think so. She's getting a bit too old for all of us to be carrying her, though."

Will grinned. "Do you intend to stop?"

"Not until it's absolutely necessary," Hannibal replied, swift and sincere. Once upon a time, he had put Mischa down and never picked her back up again. Truly, he could remember much of those last few days, but not the exact last moment he carried her like she was his own child. He intended to remember the last time he ever held Michelle, a moment that seemed to flit by in everyone's lives, unnoticed and unmarked.

Will looked away from him, towards the doorway, towards where his coat and shoes rested. Hannibal fought the desire to ask him to stay. "I should get going. The dogs..."
"Of course."

Will looked back at him, a brief moment of eye contact, intense and aching, before his gaze dropped again. "Thanks for having me."

"I'd hope to have you for dinner again."

"Yeah, maybe soon."

Will Graham was intelligent, possibly the most intellient man Hannibal had ever met. Smarter than Miriam Lass, who had been a bright creature in her own right. Lass had found Hannibal almost by accident, and if Hannibal had not been quicker, he would have been in prison long before Will had ever walked into his life.

If Miriam Lass could figure it out, there was no doubt Will Graham could. Eventually, Hannibal knew, he would be caught, and it would be Will Graham that worked it out. It was time to put contingency plans into place, preparing to divert attention that would no doubt fall on him.

And yet.

Will Graham was beautiful. He was beautiful in the style of a classic painting. He was beautiful in violence, finger on the trigger and covered in blood. He was a softer beauty in

Hannibal’s home, holding Hannibal’s child like she was something precious to Will as well. And Hannibal was beginning to realize, with a stirring inside him he’d believed himself above, that there were other ways, other places in which Will Graham would be beautiful. Hannibal wanted to keep him, to see him in every way. He wanted to be seen in return. He knew Will could accept it, if only he followed his own instincts.

But would he? Would he allow Hannibal to guide him where he needed to be, or would he fight Hannibal and his own reality? Hannibal would prepare for both, hope for one, and ensure he was still standing, regardless, when whatever end was coming finally arrived.

Chapter End Notes

I maintain that Hannibal is too smart to be lured into the weird Freddie Lounds bait, and therefor everything that happened with Miriam Lass's arm is the serial killer version of a temper tantrum.

And yes, he does take Michelle with him when he goes to the cliff house, because it would be super suspicious if every time he called Nina to babysit, random body parts popped up all over Maryland. It goes without saying that this is probably not good parenting.

Hannibal is starting to figure out he has feelings. He doesn't know what to do with this information.

Also, everyone meet Nina! I fucking love Nina. We will see a little bit more of Nina very soon.

This chapter almost did not happen and I am sorry. As you already know, I went away last weekend. I was gone for three days and then when I came home... I had the world's most absolutely terrible cold. SOOO bad. I could barely read and I certainly couldn't write. I had to force this chapter out.

I'm going away again this weekend, but I'll be somewhere I can type. I'm thinking Tuesday for the next update, but I'll try to get it up Monday if I can.

Next time!: Hannibal is frustrated, Will has A Feeling, and Michelle has a complaint.

Intimate Connections

Chapter Notes

> This is a transitional chapter. It exists to get us from Point A to Point B. Y'all are *really* gonna like point B.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Children were not commonly seen at events such as this, but there was no rule barring them, and Hannibal was trying to foster a love of culture in Michelle. It was slow-going, she struggled to focus on most things, and the singer's performance was purely auditory stimulation, with nothing visual for Michelle to focus on. Still, Michelle was a well-behaved child. She already knew what Hannibal expected of her at events like this, and though she was clearly starting to get restless, the worst she got up to as the benefit concert ended was fidgeting with the hem of her dress.

"Tėtis," She whispered as people stood to applaud, tugging at his sleeve, "It's over? We can go home?"
"Shortly," Hannibal promised. He did not linger at these things as long as he had before Michelle, but he was attempting to get her used to the socialization that came after an event. So far, he had been mildly successful. Michelle could be still and peaceful for about a half an hour before she asked to go home again. Hannibal did not believe that children should be seen and not heard; he didn't see how Michelle was to learn to interact with adults if never given the chance to practice. Still, she was a shy, quiet child to begin with when around people she hadn't claimed herself, and several of Hannibal's associates liked to fawn over her, even those not typically fond of children.

Hannibal himself was not sure he planned to stay long. He'd spotted Franklyn out of the corner of his eye, watching Hannibal with an uncomfortably fond expression.

As predicted, Michelle was popular in her little blue dress. She'd started out with matching gloves, but had begun to complain about the fabric before they'd even arrived. The gloves were tucked into Hannibal's pocket with his handkerchief, and Michelle's bared hands were wrapped around his own, clinging to him as Mrs. Komeda lectured him about his dinner parties.

"You used to throw the most exquisite parties," She was saying, "You heard me, *used to*."

"I'm afraid certain things have kept me quite busy," Hannibal said, tapping at Michelle's hand pointedly. Mrs. Komeda was far too well-mannered, if a bit brash, to roll her eyes, but Hannibal was certain she was considering it.

“Ah yes, *parenting*,” Mrs. Komeda said, drawing the last word out as if it was something much filthier, “An excuse for any mere mortal, but not for you, Hannibal. She was at your last party, and look at the little dear, she’s practically a little china doll. I don’t think anyone would even notice her.”

Michelle peered up at Mrs. Komeda, a slight hint of bravery taking over. “We had a dinner party for my birthday,” She offered shyly.

“Did you now?” Mrs. Komeda asked, one eyebrow raised as she stared Hannibal down.

“Uh-huh. We had mac & cheese.”

They’d had a great deal more than that, but of course it would be *that* dish which Michelle remembered most fondly. Hannibal was not one to flush in public, but he might have had be been a lesser man. “It was not my party,” He offered under Mrs. Komeda’s inquisitive stare, “And therefor not my menu. Although I did manage to encourage some beef loin.”

“And cake,” Michelle added hastily.

“Yes,” Hannibal agreed, gently hushing her with a touch to her shoulder, “What sort of birthday party would not have cake?”

“Well, if you can throw a birthday party, you can certainly throw a traditional dinner party,” Mrs. Komeda insisted, a teasing lilt to her voice.

“The feast must present itself,” Hannibal said, shaking his head, “But I’m sure one will in due time.”

Michelle tugged at his wrist, looking just behind Hannibal.

“Tėtis,” She whispered, coming up on her tiptoes. Hannibal leaned down to offer his ear, so that whatever she said would not be loudly shared with their audience. “That man keeps staring at you.”

From across the room came Franklyn Froideveaux, trailed by another, more unfamiliar man. Mrs. Komeda had spotted him too. Grinning, she said “I do believe this young man is trying to get your attention.”

Tėtis had his ‘other people’ smile on, but not the good one. Not the one that soothed people and made them want to talk to him about art and dinner parties, but the stiff funny one that made Michelle want to steal all his attention until he smiled with *her* smile.

Mr. Froideveaux was a weird man. He smiled too much while his hands fidgeted. His face said happy while all his motions said anxious. Michelle didn’t like it when people’s faces and their bodies said different things; people were hard enough to read at the best of times.

“I’m his patient.” Michelle frowned up at Tėtis. Tėtis’s eyes had gone all sharp, lined at the corners. Michelle wanted to ask him if patient confidentiality didn’t apply to some people, but she didn’t want to interrupt when Tėtis already looked so upset. She let Tėtis handle Mr.

Froideveaux, her eyes sliding over the people. There was Mrs. Komeda, who talked too loud and who was a little too demanding with Tėtis, who liked politeness. Then Mr. Mangrove, just by her, he always smelled funny, sharp and unpleasant. Michelle didn't want him to pat her shoulder and ask questions about school and then not listen to the answers, so she looked away.

The man who stood behind Mr. Froideveaux, just a few feet away from where Michelle herself stood, was tall. Michelle had to tilt her head all the way back to look at Mr. Budge. Mr. Budge watched Tėtis with a smile that stretched his mouth and nothing else. Michelle dropped her gaze to his hands to see the tense lines running through him. This was not 'happy.' Michelle couldn't see what it was, but it wasn't 'happy.'

Mr. Budge's left hand twitched. Michelle glanced up at his face and found his dark eyes locked on hers. She froze, heart pounding, as he looked through her, looked right *into* her.

He looked like Daddy, in his eyes. There was nothing in his eyes. Nothing that matched her flashcards or her books, nothing that Michelle could identify. Just something wrong, something numb like when Michelle's skin went tight or when someone was rude to Tėtis. Mr. Budge had their eyes, and she didn't like it.

Mr. Budge looked at her and smiled. Michelle wanted to crawl into Tėtis's skin.

"Would you like to discuss our chance encounter?" Hannibal asked at their next session.

"That was your daughter?" Franklyn replied, deflecting away from Hannibal's pointed stare, "You've never mentioned her."

"For her safety, as well as your own security." Franklyn was a harmless neurotic, but Hannibal had other clients who were not so harmless. He had ensured it. "Our sessions are for you, Franklyn, and if you are to express all the things you may need to, it is best to keep the focus on your own life."

Franklyn fidgeted in his chair. "I'm just saying, she was cute. So well behaved. I would have loved to hear about her sooner, I love children."

This, of course, was precisely why Hannibal never mentioned Michelle to any of his clients.

"I don't know who you are outside this room," Franklyn continued petulantly, "I didn't even know you *had* a kid. I just want to know you. I think we would make great friends."

"I'm a source of stability and clarity, Franklyn, not your friend."

"But I want you to be," Franklyn insisted. "You're a single parent, right? I mean, you didn't bring a date to the benefit, you've never been seen with a wife. It must be hard.

"Franklyn," Hannibal said, in a sharper tone than he typically used with his clients, "I will not be discussing my child with you."

Franklyn, thankfully, lost the bravery required to press forward, and instead turned the subject to his misguided dreams of friendship with people beyond his reach.

"Do you think," Will asked over glasses of wine in Hannibal's office, "That someday, someone, a single person, will ask me if I think a killer is the Chesapeake Ripper, and *actually listen to my response*."

"I listen to you," Hannibal pointed out, nursing his own glass. He really needed to stop after this one if he intended to make it home to relieve Nina.

Will chuckled, a soft, derisive sound with little real pleasure. "That makes you a party of one," he replied.

"Your colleague, Zeller, was it? He still disagrees with your theory?"

"Zeller disagrees with me as a concept. It's a particular hobby of his."

"No love lost between you," Hannibal noted.

"He resents me taking over his crime scenes without a real FBI badge. It's not exactly a shock. He's used to his little team of three, and in waltzes the Special Agent, Jack's personal little pet."

"I think I preferred the teacup metaphor," Hannibal said gently. Will rolled his eyes.

"You would."

Hannibal pressed on, "Less degrading, don't you think?"

Will shifted, uncomfortable. "My life is degrading by nature. I've adjusted."

"Surely not."

Glancing towards the windows, Will shrugged. "People stare. People have always stared. My mind doesn't work the way it should, I jump along paths most people can't even see. I'm pretty sure my students think I'm some sort of vampire, which is just great since they're all fully grown adults who should be passed this sort of petty gossip. Every time someone talks about my work with the FBI, they make sure to mention I was too 'unstable' to pass the screenings. I don't fit. It is as uncomfortable as it is normal, at this point." When Will looked back again, he froze. At some point, Hannibal had crossed the room, and now they stood, mere inches apart. Suddenly he could see all the stripes of color that made up Hannibal's hair, not just blond, but silver and tawny. Particles that came together to form the whole. Will wondered when he had first realized that Hannibal was attractive, and then shoved that thought into a box as quickly as he could manage.

"Your mind works exactly the way it should," Hannibal told him, with a quiet whisper that was stifling in its intimacy. Will swallowed a hasty gulp of wine.

"At least somebody thinks so."

“Okay,” Will said to him later in the week, while they both watched Michelle scramble over playground equipment, “*Now* it’s the Ripper.”

“Two serial killers harvesting organs from the same field?” Hannibal asked, as though he would ever doubt Will’s observations.

“What the hell is in the water here?” Will retorted, laughing quietly. “I swear there’s a new, bizarrely unique serial killer every week. And I don’t travel all that far for work.”

“A higher poplation density would imply a higher number of abnormalities.”
“That’s one way of putting it.” Will sighed, leaning back on the bench. “I need a vacation.”
Before Hannibal could reply, Will leaned forward again, calling across the playground, “Hey! Get down from there!”

Michelle looked up from where she’d been scaling the outside edge of the wooden castle. Flushed with the guilt of being caught, she dropped back down to the mulch and bolted instead for the swings. She was still no better at pushing herself, but she launched into one on her stomach and let the momentum carry her.

Hannibal found himself staring at Will as he settled back into his seat. Will flushed, much as Michelle had, the two of them mirror images in their embarrassment. “I’m sorry, I’m overstepping.”

“On the contrary,” Hannibal told him, “I’m pleased to have someone else looking out for her. It’s been...” Hannibal stopped. He did not make himself vulnerable. Any exposed pieces of his life had been carefully crafted and staged before sharing them. Yet when he spoke again, it was with honesty. “It has been lonely, with just the two of us. Michelle does not connect to others easily, despite how it may seem with yourself and Abigail. And I’m afraid she gets that from me. We are neither of us prone to sharing our space.”

Will’s flush had spread as Hannibal spoke, a pleased smile settling onto his features. “You’ve shared it with me. And with Abigail.”

“We have,” Hannibal agreed, “And I find… I’m not sure what we would do if either of you decided to vacate it.” He paused, then pushed forward. He had been raw enough, now was the time to get something in return. “I apologize, that was...”
“A bit much?” Will offered shyly. He ducked his head, turning his gaze from Hannibal to Michelle, now back to testing her boundaries on the play structures. “I feel the same.”

Something was growing between them. Hannibal tended to it, whispered sweetness to it as he watered and pruned its buds, but even he could not be sure what would blossom. That was up to Will.

It had gone too far, at this point. Hannibal should have put a stop to it sooner, but maintaingin his relationships with Will and Abigail, as well as keeping Alana’s protective instincts soothed and balancing all of this with parenting, all of these things had worked together to

keep him very busy. But now, Franklyn had admitted to finding him while shopping for *cheese*, of all things, and Hannibal was many things, but none of them were 'stupid enough to believe it was a coincidence.'

"I didn't want to approach you, you seemed so upset the last time." Ah, good, so Franklyn was not *completely* oblivious. "You had your daughter with you again."

Despite his misgivings, Hannibal allowed the topic. Perhaps, given something to satiate his thirst for knowledge, Franklyn would be more receptive to changing the subject. "Yes, she enjoys helping me shop for our groceries. I am attempting to encourage a more adventurous palate."

Franklyn smiled at him as if they were sharing a secret. "I have a nephew," He said, "He's eleven. The most adventurous his palate gets is spicy Doritos."

Hannibal had only the vaguest of ideas what a 'Dorito' was, and no desire to confirm the suspicion. "Children are often picky. It helps to ease them into things when they are young."

"I'm still impressed that you can get her to try different types of cheese. I love cheese, there are so many varieties. Tobias can't eat dairy."

There, an opening. "Do you desire Tobias sexually?"

As Franklyn stammered his way through denials, Hannibal allowed himself to relax. He would confer with Alana and Bedelia, with Fredrick if he had to. No doubt, one of them would have a more suitable referral for Franklyn.

"Being alone comes with a dull ache, doesn't it?" It was a surprisingly apt observation from a normally oblivious man, apt enough to startle Hannibal from his mild and vague attentions into actually looking at Franklyn.

"It can."

Later, when Frankly was gone, Hannibal sat himself at his desk and thought. It was not often that a comment from a *patient* led him to introspection, and he didn't like it.

Hannibal had never considered himself to be alone, although recent sessions with Bedelia were making him doubt himself. He surrounded himself with people on a surface level, with colleagues and acquaintances he could invite for dinner, but no one came any closer than that. Before Michelle, that was all it was.

Then there was Michelle, and despite what Bedelia may think of *that*, it was very difficult to be alone with a child watching your every move.

But Michelle did not truly understand, did she? She was much too young. She would follow where he led, but she could not truly look underneath the skin of his so-called 'person suit' and *see*.

Hannibal was cultivating Will, cultivating Abigail, but did either of them really *see?*

It was a shame he couldn't eat Franklyn. Patients made for poor Ripper victims. But he would fantasize about it, at least, and hope that got him through this rough-edged irritation.

The serial-killer-of-the-week (God, when had his life become a procedural cop show? If he walked in on anybody having an affair in the morgue, Will was going to change his name and flee the state) was *not* the Chesapeake Ripper, although the Ripper was clearly active again. Will was going to rub it in Zeller's face just as soon as he could figure out how to do so subtly.

That thought, of course, trailed off the second Hannibal rolled up his sleeves and climbed into the back of an ambulance.

Hannibal Lecter had nice arms. Will tried to recall if he'd ever noticed anyone's arms before and failed to think of a single moment. Nicer still were his hands, whether they were wrapped around the stem of a wine glass or deep inside a body as they were now. They were capable hands, surgeons hands. Something about that set off a tiny alarm bell in Will's head. This was quickly drowned out by the rush of realization as Hannibal looked up from the man to meet his eyes.

How long had Hannibal been beautiful? More importantly, how long had Will been *aware* he was beautiful? Beautiful seemed an odd term to apply to a man, let alone a man a decade Will's senior, but there it was: Will thought Hannibal was beautiful. He thought Hannibal was clever, brilliant even. A phenomenal chef, a better father. A confidant who had dragged Will back from the edge of the abyss more than once.

How pathetic did one have to be to fall in love with their own psychiatrist?

'*Am I your psychiatrist, or are we just having conversations?'*

Suddenly, Will hoped they were conversations. Except, no. Just no. Because Hannibal may have ticked off every item on Will's list (And god did he ever. The last man, the last *person*, even, that Will had felt this strongly for had been a rush of easily-fooled college-aged hormones, not a real infatuation), but Will ticked off very few on anyone's. A shabby man who lived alone in the woods with seven dogs and occasionally sleepwalked his way down several miles of empty road. *What a catch*.

Hannibal returned to him without a speck of blood on his shirt. Will admired him quietly and said not a damn thing he thought.

The infatuation was the reason he decided not to stay for the dinner party. That and his complete lack of appropriate clothing. Will stood awkwardly in the kitchen, surrounded by professionally dressed assistants and staring blankly at Hannibal's suit, which he had determined to be a safer sight than Hannibal's face. Or arms. Will had hoped to keep his hands busy with the wine bottle, but Hannibal had already liberated it with altogether too much pleasure for something *Will* had picked out.

“You’re sure you won’t stay?” Hannibal asked, not for the first time, and Will wanted to, he really did.

“I have a date with the Chesapeake Ripper,” He said instead, shaking his head.

“You’re not *staying*?” This voice was too high pitched and too emotional to have been Hannibal, who had already seemed to resign himself to Will’s anti-social tendencies. Both men turned to the doorway, where Michelle stood in a tiny little suit that was thankfully *not* plaid. Will wasn’t sure what he’d do if Hannibal started passing his love of patterns onto her.

“You have to stay,” Michelle continued, pushing her way through the kitchen with little regard for the assistants fumbling around her. Her little face was scrunched up with displeasure. Will had the awful suspicion that she might cry. “You have to stay,” She said again, “I wore a *tie!”*

There was a long moment of silence. Will was thankful that Hannibal, at least, did not seem any better at deciphering this particular bit of child logic.

“Michelle,” Hannibal said gently, “Will has work to do.”

“It’s late,” She said, shaking her head, “Work’s over.”

“Some work never ends,” Will said, scooping her up. She wriggled in his arms, refusing to settle against his shoulder as she usually did. Instead, she pushed back to level him with the full weight of her glare.

“You *have* to stay,” She repeated, “We don’t even *like* any of the other grown-ups here.”

“Michelle!” Hannibal’s stern voice thankfully kept the smile away from Will’s face, though he still felt like he might start laughing any second, “That was very rude, and further more, it was dishonest.”

Michelle looked chastened for only a second before the look was back. She gripped Will’s face in two small hands, very carefully looking into his eyes. “I would like it very much if you stayed, please,” She said, in a voice so very obviously mimicked from Hannibal that her words even slurred in a child’s mockery of his accent.

In the corner of Will’s eyes, Hannibal looked lost. It was a split-second look, a moment of uncharacteristic helplessness, and then it was gone so fast that Will began to doubt he’d seen it at all.

Gently, Will pulled her hands from his face. “I would like very much to eat dinner with *you*,” He assured her, emphasizing the last word, “But I do have to go to work. I promise, you’re going to have a lot more fun than I am.”

“I promise I *won’t,”* She insisted, “Not if you don’t stay.”

Will had never seen such brash rudeness from her. He’d begun to suspect she was more doll than child, but apparently even Hannibal’s careful parenting could not squash all of a small child’s poor social skills. It was more endearing than it had any right to be.

“Another time,” Will promised, depositing her into Hannibal’s waiting arms. “Another time, just the three of us, okay?” He realized only after the fact that he hadn’t bothered to ask Hannibal, had just invited himself into their lives. When his eyes darted to Hannibal, Hannibal looked… Pleased. Will flushed, and distracted himself by taking one more liberty. He leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to Michelle’s cheek. She clutched it afterwards as if it was a delicate, physical thing she could protect.

“Promise,” She demanded, some of her earlier petulance melting away under an insecurity Will could empathize with easily.

“I promise.”

When he left, Will told himself that Hannibal’s eyes didn’t linger, that neither of them had felt something spark in that kitchen. Will told himself a lot of things, very few of them true.

“You were very rude today,” Tėtis lectured as he tucked Michelle into bed that night. “The guests noticed your grumpiness. I had to apologize on your behalf.”

Michelle wanted very much to repeat some of Nina’s sayings on what the guests could do, but the look on Tėtis’s face was already making her tummy twist into painful loops.

“You promised he was ours,” She said instead, turning her face away. “If he’s ours, he should stay.”

“He’s not quite ready yet,” Tėtis told her, cupping her chin and turning her back towards him, “You cannot force people to do things they’re not ready for.”

“But why *not?”* Michelle whined, even though she knew Tėtis did not approve of whining, “Why isn’t he ready for us?”

“Were you ready, when you first came to stay?” Tėtis was making the face that meant disappointment. Michelle hated that face the most. She fidgeted, chewing on her lip, and didn’t answer.

Tėtis tapped her lip with his thumb until she stopped, then continued, “I seem to recall you spent a lot of time hiding. Once I searched for nearly an hour and found you tucked into my laundry hamper. And I allowed you the time you needed to adjust, did I not?”

“Will’s not hiding in the hamper.”

“Will is still hiding, though.” Tėtis’s voice grew gentler. He climbed into bed beside Michelle and let her cling to him. “Will is still hiding, and he may need to hide for a bit longer yet. It may be...” He paused, then continued, and that was how Michelle knew he wanted to keep a secret, but wouldn’t. Not from her. “It may get worse before it gets better, do you understand?”

“But it will get better?” Michelle’s voice sounded tiny. She felt young, like a little kid instead of a big eight year old who could help cook and do all the things Tėtis needed her to do.

“I promise,” Tėtis told her, “That eventually, even if it doesn’t seem like it, everything is going to straighten out.”

It was not a yes. But it was a promise, and sometimes, those were more important.

“I’m sorry I was rude today.”

“Have you learned?”

“Yes, Tėtis.”

“Then you are forgiven.”

He left her with a kiss to the forehead, flicking her night lights on. Michelle laid in bed, staring at the ceiling, and wondered why people had to be so difficult.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there you have it. I told you we were building to Feelings.

I enjoyed having Michelle be a little bit bratty. I've implied before that she is spoiled, but I think she rarely acts on that because Hannibal would find it unacceptable. She's comfortable with Will, though, and therefor not afraid to step out of line a bit.

So, whether or not Hannibal's office is in his house or in another building has been a matter of debate the entire time I've been in this fandom. Sometimes it is very clearly not. This episode made me think maybe it is? I have no fucking clue. For the purposes of this story, they're two different buildings, because the other way is stupid. Don't see patients in your actual house especially if you are attempting to get them to commit murder. It's dumb. It's a dumb thing to do, and Hannibal would be even *less* likely to do it if he had a small child.

This chapter isn't as long as some of them, but that is because next chapter is going to be a bit of a behemoth. It contains most of the scenes I've been plotting since the beginning, including the second thing I ever planned for this story (The first being Michelle and Will's meeting in Hannibal's waiting room).

Next time! (Friday? Ish? I like my Monday-Thursday post schedule but I wasn't lying when I said it's gonna be a bit of a behemoth): The author finally gives you all something you want, as well as something you really did *not* want, but the net sum is positive. Also, Tobias Budge exists some more, and Nina makes her next appearance!

(There's a preview for you...)

Culmination

Chapter Notes

> This chapter contains both Trigger *and* content warnings, aren't you lucky?! Skip down to the end note if you need to read those. (The end note is massive by the way this is why I should use my tumblr more often)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Michelle knocked her booster seat onto the floor of the Bentley in her haste to get out of the car. She came tearing up the driveway towards Will, stopping with a shriek of pure delight as the dogs burst out the door around him.

“Tètis,” She yelped, as Buster, the least trained of Will’s pack, stood up on his hind legs to put his front paws all over her jacket, “You didn’t say he had *dogs!*”

As this was usually the first thing people were warned about Will, he couldn’t help but shoot Hannibal a wry smile. “Really? You didn’t mention it?”

“I thought it best to leave it a surprise,” Hannibal told him, and Will couldn’t fault that argument. Michelle was gleeful, romping through the snowy yard with the pack of dogs, all gentle with her except for Buster, who was too little to cause her any real harm. Winston in particular seemed to have attached to her, always just by her side if her foot caught and she stumbled.

“Have you made any progress in hunting your animal?” Hannibal asked. Will shook his head and glanced back at Michelle, concerned.

“It didn’t sound good. If it wasn’t a coyote, coyotes probably got it. Maybe even if it was, it sounded injured enough.”

“You’re not expecting to find it alive, then.”

“If we’re lucky? A paw, maybe. But if we do find it, I won’t be able to subdue it on my own.” Michelle looked up at Will and waved, still giggling. “If it’s hurt, or worse… Will she be okay?”

Hannibal watched Michelle for a minute. “She’s a resilient child,” He finally said, “And she understands the necessity of death, in the grand scheme of things. Nothing lives forever.”

“Understanding and seeing are two different things.”

“She’ll have the both of us, though.”

Will smiled, whistling to bring the dogs back towards him. “Yeah, she will.”

They spent over an hour in the snow, Michelle bouncing around their feet with the dogs, occasionally tripping over her bad foot, but always keeping pace, always excited. In the end, they didn’t find the animal. Any of it. Not even a footprint, despite the snow. Will didn’t say anything, and hoped that Hannibal didn’t notice.

Michelle had a cell phone. It was technically for emergencies, just like the credit card in the back of her sock drawer, but since she wasn’t really old enough to have emergencies yet, it mostly got used when she was bored.

Tėtis had an iPad, but he did not believe in unsupervised screen time, so Michelle had a flip phone. Technically, it had one game, an awkward demo of Tetris. Michelle had no interest in Tetris. What she *did* have interest in was her contact list, six names long: *Abigail Hobbs (Hospital), Home, Nina Ruiz, Tėtis*, *Tėtis (Work), Will Graham.* It was Abigail she called now, fumbling her way through the nurses who answered until she could get her on the line.

“*Shelly! Perfect timing, I’m **so** bored.”*

Michelle grinned, peeking out to make sure Nina was still occupied in the kitchen, frowning at the instructions Tėtis had left for lunch. “I miss you!” She said, scurrying back to her room and crawling into her closet. She had a big closet, though not as big as Tėtis’s, and she’d tucked a squishy bean bag chair into it, a little nest for her to settle into.

“*I miss you too*.”

“We’re going to come visit you soon,” Michelle assured her, “I made Tėtis promise. It’s been busy.”

“*I’m sure it has. Did you get to use that kit I got you for your birthday?”*

Michelle held up her wrist, where a tightly threaded friendship bracelet had been wrapped by Nina’s careful fingers. “Uh-huh. I’m gonna bring you one when we come see you.”

“*That sounds great! Tell me what else you’ve been up to.”*

Michelle sank into her bean-bag, closing her eyes and picturing it. Abigail would sit at the harpsichord with her, and Will would be standing by the fireplace while Tėtis poured wine. Things were coming together. Tėtis had promised.

Will didn’t call the Lecters over the next time he heard a noise, too aware of the lack of footprints the last time. Instead, he stressed all his dogs out by tearing a hole in his chimney. He was just clearing away the debris when Alana came to his door, unexpected and concerned in a sweet, gentle way that set Will on edge.

“I just thought I’d stop by,” She told him, eyes locked on the gaping abyss he’d knocked into his wall. “I haven’t heard from you in a while. I wanted to make sure you were doing

alright."

He tried to remember the last time they'd spoken. It had to have been the party. "It's alright, I wouldn't have wanted to talk to me either if I'd said those things I said to you."

Alana shook her head with a small smile. It was a nice smile. It used to set butterflies fluttering in Will's stomach. When had that stopped? "I was possibly overstepping a bit," Alana admitted.

"No, you were overstepping a *lot*," Will replied, but he kept his voice soft and teasing. "I think it was the first time you were alone in a room with me since we've met."

To his surprise, Alana blushed.

"You were smooth about it," He hastened to assure her.

"Evidently not smooth enough."

Will shrugged, "I pay more attention than most people. You did your best. And yet, now you're making house calls?"

"Just passing through. Since you're not my patient."

No, he was not. And she was standing incredibly close. For a moment, he thought he could kiss her. For a moment, he thought he *wanted* to kiss her. And then he thought of strong arms under a button-down shirt, and that moment passed.

Alana looked up at him, half-hopeful, and Will took a step away, turning back to his chimney.

The next person to come for dinner was not Abigail, or Will, or even Nina. The next person to come for dinner was Mr. Budge.

"He's come to restring the harpsichord," was what Tėtis said when he took Mr. Budge's coat, but it was not what he had said before Mr. Budge arrived.

Mr. Budge still looked like an empty person. He greeted Michelle with a smile, and a pat on the head, like she was one of Will's dogs. She didn't think he really knew how to talk to children. His hands felt like needles on her. She ran straight for Tėtis once he'd stopped touching her.

Tėtis did not make her come to dinner, thankfully. He settled her in at her craft table with a grilled cheese sandwich and a forehead kiss, and went to serve Mr. Budge. Michelle waited until she heard the soft clink of silverware before she went for the hallway. She didn't trust Mr. Budge and his empty eyes. He terrified her, and as much as she wanted to run, she wanted to leave him alone with her Tėtis even less.

Michelle took the long way through the kitchen, pulling one of the big heavy knives from the block on the counter. She settled herself just out of sight by the doorway, clutching the knife in both hands and trying to stay very still.

“Did you kill that trombonist?” Michelle heard Tėtis ask. Mr. Budge’s answer was vague, but she didn’t need it. She knew. She hadn’t even known a trombonist was dead, until now, but she knew from the eyes. She wondered if everyone could see the eyes, or if only killers could see other killers.

She supposed this was why Tėtis had invited him for dinner. Tėtis needed to know these things. If he had suspected, he would have wanted to confirm, and Tėtis was smart. He would have seen the eyes.

Michelle relaxed a little against the wall. If Tėtis knew, if it wasn’t just her, then she was not alone. She would be safe.

“I was going to kill *you*.” Mr. Budge sounded like his eyes looked. Joy was artificial, even Michelle could hear it. He was *wrong*, faking himself. Her hands tightened around the knife so hard that they began to tremble from the effort. Tėtis would destroy him, she knew that. Tėtis did not need a little girl to protect him. She wanted to do it anyway.

“What stopped you from wanting to kill me?”

“I followed you one night. Out of town. To a lonely road. To a bus yard.”

Michelle went stiff, stifled a whimper with one of her fists.

“I’m not going to tell anyone what I saw you do,” Mr. Budge continued, “And do well.”

And Michelle *knew*.

She didn’t know what he had seen. Didn’t need to know. She knew why he was *here*, and that was what mattered. He was here because he thought he could reach out into Tėtis and find something like himself. She could hear the admiration in his words.

But he wouldn’t find it. She wouldn’t let him. If he was here to lay a claim to Tėtis, she would rip him to pieces before he ever touched him. Tėtis already had a family, already had people who could see into him, and he didn’t need Mr. Budge. Besides, there was nothing in Mr. Budge that mirrored Tėtis, no matter what he thought. Tėtis wasn’t hollow. There was still something living behind his eyes.

Mr. Budge drew the conversation out, until Michelle was nauseous from the waiting. Her vision was starting to blur, breath coming in harsh pants that drowned out all the conversation. She felt like she was underwater, drowning. The knife clattered out of her hands. The conversation stopped.

There was someone at the door.

Will was inside Hannibal’s house before he could properly comprehend why he’d come. He’d spent the entire drive thinking about it, about wanting to kiss Alana, about *not* wanting to kiss Alana.

About whether Hannibal would mind if Will’s lips were chapped.

About what it would feel like to help tuck Michelle into bed.

“Hannibal, I-” The words died in his throat as he entered the dining room. Michelle came bursting through a doorway, flinging herself at his legs like it had been a matter of weeks and not mere days since they’d seen each other.

“Hey, hey, what’s all this?” Will asked softly, hoisting her up onto his hip. Her eyes were damp and unseeing. He pressed a hand to her forehead, checking for fever, and found nothing. “What’s wrong?”

“I...” She paused, glancing up at Hannibal. “I pinched my thumb inna door,” she slurred, holding up one hand and using the other to wipe at her eyes. Will inspected the digit carefully. No redness or damage, but he pressed a kiss to it anyway, mimicking an aunt from when he’d been very small.

“Better?”

Michelle nodded, tucking her face into his neck. Will turned back to Hannibal and frowned at the table. There were only two place settings, but both were set with wine, and Michelle’s cushion was set aside. “You have company.” Will should have called ahead. Or at least *knocked*. Better yet, he should not have come at all. It had been a stupid idea. He could confess to Hannibal, reach out to him, but what kind of partner would he be? He could barely tell what was real and what wasn’t these days.

“A colleague. I’m afraid you just missed him. He was called away suddenly. But his loss is your gain, because I have dessert for three.” Hannibal smiled at them both. Will wanted to let it sooth him.

In Will’s arms, Michelle perked up. “Dessert?”

Dessert, as it turned out, was tiny individual bread puddings. Michelle seemed reluctant to be parted from Will, but she was soon settled in a stool at the kitchen island, nursing her own while Hannibal and Will talked.

“So, Will, what brings you to my kitchen at this hour?”

Will flushed, the truth banging around in his head, demanding to be heard. He settled for a different truth. “I’m hearing things,” He admitted in a whisper, “Things I don’t think are there. I sleepwalk, I get headaches. I feel unstable.”

“You’re here as a clutch for balance,” Hannibal said, sounding more pleased than Will thought the situation warranted.

“I don’t know why I’m here,” Will lied.

“You’re seeking stability. I must admit to no small amount of pleasure that you find it here with us.” Hannibal smiled at him. Will tried not to stop breathing and shook his head, changing the subject.

“You told him about Mr. Budge,” Michelle said, once Will was gone.

“You’re eavesdropping again,” Hannibal replied, but there was no condemnation in his voice. Michelle shrugged, tugging her step stool out to help with the dishes.

“Was I subtle?”

“I knew you were there, earlier,” Hannibal told her, “But Tobias did not, not until you dropped the knife. Just what did you intend to do with it?”

Michelle stared down at the dishtowel, mindlessly drying the same fork in rhythmic motions. “Mr. Budge wants something from you. He can’t have it.”

“You sound very certain.”

Michelle broke from her reverie, looking up at him with wide, dark eyes. “He can’t have it,” She repeated desperately, “It’s not his! We don’t share with him! We picked our people and he can’t have it!”

“Hush,” Hannibal soothed, reaching out to tuck a stray strand of hair behind Michelle’s ear, “There is nothing Tobias wants that I am willing to give.”

“But you’re sending Will after him.”

“My clever girl,” Hannibal praised, watching the way Michelle’s eyes lit up, “I merely want to see what Will’s response will be.”

Michelle nodded thoughtfully, then reached out and wrapped a hand in Hannibal’s tie, running the soft fabric through her fingers until the sensation calmed her. “But what if Will loses?”

“Then he will not be half the man I suspect him to be.” Hannibal gently pried the fabric from Michelle’s grip, cupping her face in both of his hands. “You wanted him to be ready for us, did you not?”

“Yes, Tėtis.”

“Then he must be able to care for himself. Just as we have.”

“It won’t break him?”

“Did it break you?”

For a moment, Michelle’s eyes went very dark, hollow and empty. Then she blinked, and the moment passed. She offered him a small, hesitant smile. “Not yet.”

“My brave, fierce little thing.”

Nina had a study meeting at 5, unavoidable and impossible to reschedule, with a big project

due so soon. She was supposed to drop Michelle off at the office at exactly 4:30, to minimize potential overlap with clients, but she was early.

“You can just leave me here,” Michelle told her, setting her backpack onto one of the chairs in the waiting room, “There’s a private patient exit.”

Nina checked her watch, biting her lip. “I dunno. We’re *really* early, and I don’t need Dr. Lecter on my case if you get yourself into trouble.”

“I won’t get myself into trouble,” Michelle insisted with a pout, “I know how to behave!”

“Most days,” Nina muttered, but Michelle could still hear it. “Look, I’ll just stick around a few more minutes, the group can start without me if they have to. Show me your homework again, we’ve got time to go over it a little more.”

Michelle dutifully dug through her bag, pausing when the door opened.

“I’m sorry,” Nina said, “I didn’t realize Dr. Lecter had another appointment.”

Michelle looked up and went very stiff and still, every molecule of her body tightening until she was turning to solid stone, frozen like the girl in the fairy tale who trod on the loaf. Soon the bugs would come to land on her and she would still be frozen, because the emptiness behind Mr. Budge’s eyes was gone, and now she could see what true joy looked on someone who had twisted the very concept.

“You’re hurt,” Nina said, reaching out to where Mr. Budge’s ear had bled heavily down over the side of his face. He looked from Michelle to Nina and his smile grew pearly white fangs.

“Nina,” Michelle tried to warn her, but she was stone and her voice died in her throat with a little croak. Mr. Budge pulled the wires from his pocket.

Nina finally realized what was going to happen moments before it did. She stepped back, pushing Michelle with her towards Tėtis’s office door. Michelle went, her limbs unfolding with graceless, jerky motions.

Mr. Budge was faster than Nina’s hesitant fear. He moved forward in a lunge, wrapping the wires around Nina’s throat. Blood welled up under the fine lines, and it was not at all like the last time Michelle watched someone die. This time, it *hurt*.

Nina fell in a mess of blood, and she was not Nina anymore, just the body. Mr. Budge stepped on the body, instead of over it. The seams of Michelle’s jeans were damp and stiff, and she felt all her limbs shaking like her bad leg did on a long day.

She screamed.

The walls of Hannibal’s office were quite thoroughly soundproofed, but the door occasionally bled sound through. It was not prepared to hold back a child’s high-pitched scream. Hannibal was on his feet before he even cognitively recognized the sound, one step closer to the door when it burst open. Michelle scrambled through the doorway, splashes of blood on her shoes

and the front of her jeans soaked through. She gave no sign that she'd even seen him, crawling frantically beneath the desk. Hannibal's desk was largely open to the room, but it was the only thing Michelle would fit under, and she curled into a shaking ball, braced against the side of the drawers.

Tobias followed her in at a slower pace, an easy smile spreading across his lips. "The police came to question me about the trombonist," He said to Franklyn, "I just killed two men. And a young woman in your entryway," He added with a nod towards Hannibal. Beneath the desk, Michelle let out a shaking squeak of a noise that died before it grew any real volume.

Hannibal could hear the blood pounding in his ears. He had miscalculated. It had happened before, and would happen again, but he had been so certain of the results this time. And now Will…

Hannibal had not for one second considered the fact that Tobias might kill Will. It had not even been a possibility in his mind, and he was suddenly frozen, unable to process it.

Franklyn was babbling. It was grating at the best of times, and this was not the best of times. "Franklyn, I want you to leave-"

"Stay, Franklyn," Tobias interrupted him. Hannibal bristled uncomfortably. This man had dared to infringe on that which belonged to Hannibal, on his loved ones and his personal spaces, and now he was being unbearably rude. Had there not been a witness, Hannibal would have liked to teach him exactly what Hannibal did to rude people.

As Franklyn was still chattering away, it gave Hannibal no small amount of satisfaction to slide up alongside him and get rid of the witness in question. Franklyn's neck snapped easily under his hands, and he let the man drop.

"I was looking forward to that," Tobias said, looking disappointed for the first time since Hannibal had met him.

"I saved you the trouble."

Tobias glanced towards the desk. Michelle squeaked and huddled back against the wood, trying to make herself even smaller. "In front of the little one?"

"That's not something you need be concerned with," Hannibal said, sharper than he'd meant. The loss of Will, and the way Tobias kept glancing back towards the desk, were both twisting in his stomach, ripping his usual stone-face away from him.

Tobias held up the cords in his hands, still damp with blood. "They know. They'll come for me. But I won't be here, and I won't leave witnesses."

Hannibal had meant to fight defensively, to let Tobias come to him, but the threat was clear, and Hannibal saw red. He got in the first blow, a sharp jab aimed at Tobias's face and settling instead for the arm that came up to defend. Then he had to jump back, keeping out of range as Tobias swung his cords in a careful arc, building up speed and lashing out.

Hannibal was good in a fight, but usually his victims were unarmed and didn't see him coming. Tobias managed to land several good hits, ripping a slice across Hannibal's sleeve. Hannibal stepped back with a hiss, wincing at the splotches of blood that welled up.

Out of the corner of his eye, Michelle moved under the desk. She peered at Hannibal's arm, taking in the blood with hollow, empty eyes, all traces of his little girl completely gone. Hannibal shook his head once, sternly. Tobias started to follow Hannibal's gaze, and Hannibal leaped forward, risking the cords to glance another blow against Tobias's ribs. Tobias reached for him, one arm wrapping around his neck, but with a scream, he dropped Hannibal as quickly as he'd grabbed him.

The letter opener from Hannibal's desk protruded from Tobias's leg, well-sharpened and lodged deeply into the tissue. Michelle had ignored Hannibal's warning, launching herself to his defense with the closest thing to hand. She stared at it now, life sparking in her eyes once more, shock flooding her, then started to scramble back, bravery lost with her weapon.

Tobias moved faster than Hannibal could, even with the letter opener stabbing through his muscles. Hannibal knocked him to the ground, throwing his entire body into the tackle, but Tobias still managed to grab Michelle's twisted ankle as he went down. She'd been going for the ladder, seeking the safety of the loft, and her face smacked against it with a horrifying thud as Tobias dragged her down.

Michelle was silent and still where she fell, face down against the carpet. Hannibal had been angry before, protective, but now he was flooded with a white hot flash of rage that threatened to burn him alive. He could see Mischa from where he lay, torn apart by savages, overlapping the sight of Michelle like a badly exposed photograph. Like they were the same person, two little girls inhabiting the same broken body.

He didn't snap Tobias's neck. It would have been too easy. What he wanted was to rip him apart with his bare hands, break every bone in his body, but even in his rage, Hannibal was practical. He gripped Tobias's head in both hands and reared back, smacking it against the floor once, twice, a third time, until there was blood underneath his fingertips. Somewhere beyond the howling of Hannibal's rage, Michelle caught her breath and began to wail. It was the most beautiful sound Hannibal had ever heard.

Tobias was alive, but barely. He would never move again. Hannibal stood and went for one of his heavier decorations, a statue of a stag, and brought it up high over his own head.

Will had come to the office as soon as Jack had called, as soon as the ringing in his ears had cleared and he could think things through. Jack hadn't been able to tell him much, just that there had been an incident at Hannibal's office. That people had died.

Will arrived just as Jack did, following him into the building with heart and head pounding. Law enforcement was everywhere. He had to step past two people bundling up a body in the waiting room, and when he looked down, Nina Ruiz's empty, dead eyes looked back up at him. Unseeing, unfeeling. She was not one of Hannibal's patients. There was only one reason she would be here, in his office, and the tight feeling that had been growing in Will's chest

suddenly clenched painfully. He shoved past Jack, needing to be inside the office *now,* needing to know…

Hannibal was leaning against the desk, Michelle bundled into a shock blanket and held tightly in his arms, crying silently but heavily. An EMT hovered ineffectively around them, but every time the man tried to get close enough to inspect their injuries, Michelle's quiet tears hitched up into a loud distress.

Everything tense in Will snapped completely, a broken rubber band, and he very nearly collapsed from the force of it. They were alive. They were *safe.*

They both turned to look at him, and Will let free a distressed noise of his own. Hannibal was bleeding freely in several places, smearing little drops of blood over Michelle's shock blanket. Michelle herself had a huge, blossoming bruise spreading over half of her little face, one eye swollen partially shut, a cut over her cheekbone and the remains of a nosebleed drying over her lips.

"We thought you were dead," Hannibal said in a broken, shaking voice, "He told us he'd killed two police officers..."

Michelle's silence broke. She let out a loud, keening sob, wrenching her hands free of the blanket to reach for Will, and suddenly he could not stand to be apart from them anymore.

He didn't take Michelle from Hannibal so much as crush her between the two of them, one arm helping to support her while the other grabbed a fistful of the back of Hannibal's suit and dragged them both as close as he could get. Hannibal didn't even hesitate, wrapping one of his own arms around Will and tucking his face against Will's hair. They stood there like that for a long moment, the only sound Michelle's muffled, hitching cries, before Will pulled back enough to look them both over.

"You need medical attention," Will murmured, eyes tracing Hannibal's face, inspecting any little nicks. Most of the damage seemed contained to his arms, and he busied himself with Michelle's face, tilting her head back with a gentle hand on her chin. She whimpered softly, but let him move her, both hands clutching at his coat. "He hurt her," Will said, drawing in a ragged breath and looking over his shoulder. Tobias Budge was dead, of course. Jack had said something about self-defense. Will wanted to kill him all over again. He wanted to dig his teeth and nails into the man's skin until no piece of him was recognizable.

"She stabbed him with a letter opener," Hannibal said, drawing Will's attention back to him, "I couldn't reach him in time, but I was able to keep him from making it any worse."

Will looked from Hannibal to Michelle, who would not look at the body, or in fact at anything other than the two men holding her. He let out a short, hysterical laugh, pressing a kiss to the unmarked side of Michelle's face. "That's my girl," He whispered against her cheek, "My brave, fierce little girl."

When he looked up, Hannibal was looking at him with something akin to wonder. They were safe, the three of them. They had survived a man who might have killed them. They had come through this together, and suddenly, all of Will's arguments melted away. It did not

matter that he felt like he was losing his mind. It did not matter that he wasn't sure what he had to offer in this relationship. It did not matter that Hannibal was beautiful and Will was scruffy, that Hannibal was refined where Will was uncultured. It didn't matter that Will had no idea how to raise a child. What mattered was that they were here together, that they had made it through everything and come out the other side, battered and bruised, but still here. Will reached up, tangled his fingers into the soft, fine hairs at the nape of Hannibal's neck, and pulled him into a chaste, but firm kiss.

Hannibal kissed him back.

Everything was *loud loud* ***loud.*** There were people everywhere in the office, making noises and touching things and moving things around even though it was Tėtis's office and they shouldn't be touching things.

Will was here, and he had kissed her cheek and been proud of her, and that was good, and he had kissed Tėtis, and that was better, but Michelle still *hurt*. Her face hurt and her ankle hurt and her heart hurt because Nina was *dead* and her head hurt because she had to make sure to remember the right truth and not the wrong one, and she wanted a nap and a cuddle and to never ever have to be in this room again.

She'd let Will take her so that the ambulance guy could fix up Tėtis's arms, and then she'd held very still while her face was poked and prodded. "Nothing seems broken," The man had said, "But you still might want her to be checked out by a doctor-"

"No!" It was the first thing Michelle had said since the police had arrived, and she said it again, louder, one fist in Will's shirt and the other in Tėtis's, keeping them all bound together. "No no *no,* no more!" She was tired, tired of being poked and prodded and asked a million questions she didn't want to answer. "No more," She pleaded, peeking up at Tėtis. Tėtis nodded.

"Thank you for your assistance," He said to the man, pulling Michelle closer. Michelle dragged Will with her, until they were all pressed together again. The ambulance man said a few more things, but Michelle wasn't listening to him, she was listening to their heartbeats go *thud thud thud* in their chests. She listened and listened while Mr. Crawford asked questions and Tėtis told him the Right Truth, and listened and listened while everyone else left, and Tėtis brought them outside because the office was a *crime scene* now, and listened and listened until finally Tėtis said, "I should get her home."

Home. Home, where Nina had been just this afternoon, feeding Michelle her after-school snack and laughing and playing faces with her. Home, where Mr. Budge had sat and eaten their food and said to Tėtis all the Bad Things and Tėtis had not *stopped him.*

"No!" Michelle shrieked again. All her skin was tight and twisted and wrong like it was gonna fall off. She flailed, trying to make her nerves stop screaming, and whacked Tėtis in the chest.

"Hey, we don't hit," Will whispered in her ear, pressing her tight against his shoulder, and that just made the noise in her head louder, so she hit him too, harder, and on purpose.

Will grabbed one wrist and Tėtis grabbed the other, and it was really unfair that now there were going to be two of them and they were going to gang up on her. She shrieked her outrage, wordless and pained, and thrashed between them. “You promised,” She raged at Tėtis, “You promised nobody would hurt me and he *hurt* me, you promised, you *lied,* you said we never lie to each other.”

Dimly, through her haze, she realized that Tėtis looked upset when he let go of her arm. His whole face scrunched up in a way she’d seen on other people, but not Tėtis. Michelle had hurt him *inside*, where it counted most. Good. She wanted to do it again. She wanted everyone to hurt like she did because there was so much hurt inside, swelling up and screaming in her chest and she couldn’t take it all by herself.

“I hate you!” Michelle screamed, lashing out to hit Tėtis again until Will bundled both of her hands against his chest. “I hate you I hate you I hate you, you *lied to me* you *lied,* this is your fault, I hate you!”

Will struggled with the screaming, flailing child in his arms, swaddling her in the shock blanket until she was no longer a danger to any of them, including herself. “Shh...” He whispered in her ear, bouncing her in his arms like she was a much smaller child. He looked up at Hannibal, who looked more broken than Will had ever seen him, shattered and every ounce of his focus on Michelle. Will couldn’t sooth both of them at once, but he could certainly try. He reached for Hannibal, tugging at his arm until Hannibal gave in and stepped forward, sandwiching Michelle between them once more. Will remembered his own childhood, burrowing under heavy blankets and couch cushions when the world became too much and letting the weight lull him under. He gave that pressure to Michelle now, wrapped up in the blanket and people who loved her, murmuring promises in her ear.

“It’s okay, it’s all going to be okay now. It’s okay to be mad, and upset, just let it out. No one is going anywhere, we’re all here, we’re all safe.”

Hannibal drew in a deep, shuddering breath, and then joined Will in his promises, a lilting, constant cadence of what must have been Italian, whispering over and over again until Michelle finally gave up the fight and settled in their arms with a quiet sob. She cried quietly against Will’s shoulder, until finally her little body relaxed, all the tension vanishing, and she lifted her head.

“I don’t hate you,” She mumbled to Hannibal, and then burst into tears once more when he took her from Will’s arms, pressing kisses to her hair and clinging to her like she was the last source of stability in his life. He murmured soft little phrases in Michelle’s ear, things Will couldn’t translate but which slowly seemed to ease the suffering from Michelle’s face. Finally, she worked one of her hands free from the blanket and rubbed at her eyes, sniffling and looking up at both of them.

“I’m tired,” She whispered, wincing when she caught the bandaged cut on her cheek, “An’ hungry.”

“Alright,” Hannibal told her, rocking her gently, “Are you ready to let me take you home?”

“Will too!” She demanded, reaching out to grab at Will’s jacket again. She made Will ache, her wide, terrified eyes boring into him. “Stay with us. Stay the night.”

“The dogs,” Will said helplessly, looking to Hannibal. He’d been out since early that morning, running out to Baltimore and dealing with Budge. They’d be starving.

Hannibal nodded, shushing Michelle’s plaintive little whimpers. “Will has to get home, but we can-”

“No!” Whatever calm they’d brought back to Michelle was gone again. She flailed in Hannibal’s arms, clinging to Will, trying to pull them all back together. “No, don’t go, please don’t go.”

“You can stay at my place,” Will found himself saying, locking eyes with Hannibal over Michelle’s tangled hair. “I have… There’s a spare bedroom.” It was technically the master bedroom, but since Will slept in the living room with the dogs, it rarely got much use.

“Please,” Hannibal whispered, and Will would have done anything in that moment to get Hannibal to stop sounding so destroyed.

They took Hannibal’s car, Michelle refusing to be separated long enough to fetch Will’s, and stopped at Hannibal and Michelle’s home for Hannibal to pack a bag. Michelle stayed in the car, clutching at the arms of her booster seat when Hannibal offered to bring her in to help, as if she thought Will would drive away without them if she went inside. Will had thought the long drive and the exhaustion of the day would lull her to sleep, but she was still awake when they arrived, if a bit drowsy.

The last time they had come, they’d stayed outside, wandering the woods. Michelle had come in to use the restroom before the drive home, but she’d used the back door to the kitchen and been in and out. Now, she looked up from Will’s shoulder, taking in the eager dogs and the crowded room.

“Why’s there a bed in your living room?” She asked, scrunching up her face.

“The dogs get lonely,” He told her, and Winston came up to sniff her shoes as if to confirm it. Her shoes still had specks of blood on them, and Will handed her over to Hannibal once he’d dug fresh pajamas and a few boxes from his bag.

“She needs a bath,” He told Will, hesitating before pressing the boxes into Will’s hand. “If you wouldn’t mind taking care of this while I clean her up…?”

Will looked down at the boxes. Somehow, this was the weirdest part of his day. “Seriously?”

Hannibal looked pained. “Sometimes, we must do things we dislike for the comfort of those we love.”

So, while Hannibal bathed Michelle and recited Italian poetry to keep her calm, Will made Kraft Mac & Cheese in the shape of characters from a Disney film he’d never seen. Michelle

devoured it with a gusto he did not expect, suddenly famished from her long, stressful day. What was more surprising was that Hannibal ate some as well, though the expression on his face said that every bite might be the one that killed him. Even after the day they'd had, even with bandages peaking out from the sleeves of Hannibal's pajama top, Will had to laugh.

"When one is a parent," Hannibal told him stiffly, "occasional sacrifices must be made." He glanced at Michelle, who was beginning to droop over her nearly-empty bowl. "It was a craving she came to me with. I find it hard to discourage when she feels so overwhelmed." Michelle shoved her bowl away, reaching for Hannibal with shaky hands. Hannibal seemed more than happy to push his own portion aside, rocking Michelle gently in his lap.

"There's a bedroom upstairs and to the right," Will told him, "The sheets should be clean." They'd better be; Will had stopped sleeping up there long before he'd even met Hannibal.

Hannibal nodded his thanks and stood with Michelle in his arms. Will met them around the table, pressing a goodnight kiss to Michelle's forehead and then, after a moment's hesitation, to Hannibal's lips. It was no deeper than their first kiss had been, but when Will pulled back he could see a spark in Hannibal's eyes that matched his own. This was right. He couldn't regret it.

Will cleaned up the kitchen, then sat before the fireplace fussing around with the dogs for several long moments. His bed called to him, his body screaming in exhaustion, but every time he looked at it he felt a pang of emptiness. He didn't know what it was he was missing until Michelle showed up in the living room, wild eyed, with Hannibal just behind her. They'd only been upstairs an hour, not nearly long enough for either of them to have properly slept.

"You see?" Hannibal asked her, looking helplessly from Michelle to Will. "He's just downstairs. He's alright, nothing has happened to him."

"Then why is he *here*?" Michelle insisted, stubborn in her fear.

"Because here is where his bed is," Hannibal reminded her gently. Michelle stared at Will for a long moment, then the bed, clinical and uninviting in the corner. The upstairs bedroom looked more like a bedroom; for one thing, there were actual *blankets* instead of easily-changed sheets. It was not the bed Will would have picked as a child, but Michelle bolted for it, scrambling into the center of Will's bed with a fearful, yet determined expression.

"Me too," She insisted, reaching out two hands, one towards the doorway Hannibal stood in, and one towards Will's spot on the floor. "And Tėtis. Everyone together."

"Michelle," Hannibal chided, "We have imposed on Will enough for one night." He still looked lost, still looked broken, like he couldn't yet stitch together his public face.

"Together," She repeated, tears welling up in her eyes, "Everyone together where I can see you."

"You won't like sharing a bed with me," Will told her, "I get sweaty. I have nightmares. I might kick you."

“I have nightmares too,” Michelle told him, “And when I have nightmares, I go sleep in Tėtis’s bed.”

Hannibal likely had an argument for that. Any responsible adult likely had an argument for that. But Michelle was terrified, and Hannibal was hurting, and Will, for all his misgivings, could not deny either of them anything.

“Okay,” Will said, ignoring the way Hannibal gave a jolt of surprise beside him, “But I warned you.”

She can hear them, in the dark, shuffling around down there. She’s in bed, knees drawn up to her chest, listening to the heavy breathing. Their blood has pooled upwards through the mattress, through the sheets. She’s covered in it, thick and heavy on her skin.

“*Baby doll,” Daddy whispers from under the bed, raspy and choked, “Baby doll, come here to Daddy.”*

She shakes her head, slams her hands over her ears. Across the room, Nina’s corpse stares out from the closet. Her skin is peeling off where Mr. Budge sliced it open. “It’s rude to ignore people, little mouse,” Nina whispers, “How are you going to make friends?”

“*Come here to Daddy, Michelle,” Daddy repeats, the bed shaking with his voice.*

“*Listen to your father!” Mommy yells, and now Michelle is standing in her bedroom, her old bedroom, the pink bedroom. Down the hall, Baby Asher is screaming like he screamed the last time Michelle touched him, before Mommy got mad and started screaming too.*

“*You never listen to him,” Mommy yells from her puddle of blood on the floor, “You never do what he tells you and that’s why he gets so mad.*

“*Get your ass over here!” Daddy yells from under the bed, “Don’t make me come out and get you!”*

Baby Asher is screaming, louder and louder. Mommy’s body gets up and takes the pillow with her down the hall. Michelle doesn’t follow. She remembers what happened to Baby Asher.

“*Michelle,” Daddy whispers under the bed, one hand creeping out towards the Bad Foot, “Shelly-baby, Daddy’s sorry. You know Daddy loves you, right? He didn’t mean to hurt you. You’re just so difficult sometimes, you make Daddy so mad. You know Daddy wouldn’t have to do these things if you just behaved, right?”*

“*Yes, Daddy,” Michelle whispers. Daddy is lying. She knows that. Daddy always lies. But every time, she thinks, maybe **this** time, he’s sorry. This time will be better.*

“*Come here, baby doll. You were bad. You hurt Daddy. Daddy just wants you to apologize.”*

He doesn’t. She knows what she did to Daddy. She can still feel the jolt of his body against her as she’d dove at his legs, letting him stumble over her. She’d had to. He was coming at

her so fast and she knew if he started hurting her this time it wouldn't stop, but Daddy wouldn't care that she'd had to. Daddy would only care that he had been lying dead at the bottom of the stairs and it was all Michelle's fault.

But she goes anyway. Because fighting Daddy just makes it worse. She kneels down along side the bed, crouching down on her hands and knees.

Mr. Budge smiles out at her, with his sharp white teeth and his dead dark eyes. His skull is dented and bleeding where it had smacked against the floor. There's blood in his mouth. It stretches his smile wide and fake. He grabs the Bad Foot with his bloody hands and pulls her under and it hurts it hurts it ***hurts****.*

It was Winston who woke Will first, whimpering at the edge of the bed, nose to the mattress, staring at Michelle where she lay tucked between Will and Hannibal. Will blinked awake, confused. His side was damp, but it wasn't the cold chill of sweat he was used to, instead warm and spreading. The realization clicked just as Michelle shot up, eyes wide and unseeing. She stared for a moment, across the room, through the window and out into the dark fields, body wavering unsteadily. Will sat up, pushing himself out of the wet spot and reaching for her, just as she began to scream.

It was a horrid, agonizing sound, high pitched and unending. Hannibal jerked awake across the bed, pressing himself up and reaching for her. She screamed again, lashing out in every direction. One of her fists caught Will across the cheek, sharp and stinging. He winced, rubbing at his face with one hand while the other tried to still Michelle. Hannibal managed to grab her under the armpits, yanking her back into his lap, hushing her in Italian, like he had the night before, and another foreign language that didn't seem to register with her. Through it all, she screamed, pausing only to draw breath. The dogs were beginning to panic, crowding the bed and kept from it only by careful training. Winston, who was still new, had no such qualms. He lept onto the bed, sniffing at Michelle's captured hands and damp face. Will nudged him aside gently, shifting forward to cup Michelle's face in his hands as Hannibal held her still.

"You're safe," Will whispered, locking his eyes on hers even as her own darted around the room. "You're here with me, and with Tėtis, and you are *safe*, Michelle, there's no one here who can hurt you. The dogs would hear them coming for miles, honey, you're *safe*."

Michelle let out a broken sob, raspy and hoarse from her screaming. Her eyes lit on Will for a moment, recognition blossoming before she shut them again.

Hannibal held her while she cried, and Will ran his hands over her braided hair, humming for her whenever she started to tense up again. It seemed to go on forever, long enough that Michelle started to shiver in her damp pajamas, but she finally peaked back at them through heavily-lidded eyes. "Safe?" She mumbled hoarsely.

"Safe," Will promised, leaning forward to wrap both Michelle and Hannibal in his arms.

Hannibal took Michelle to the bathtub with a quick apology to Will, who brushed him off

entirely.

“It happens, Hannibal,” He said, already stripping the sheets from the bed, “She’s not the first little kid to have a bad dream.”

Michelle was less easily soothed. “Will will be mad,” She mumbled as she tidied herself up. It was far too late at night for a proper bath, and her hair was the only thing Hannibal ever still washed for her, too long to deal with herself. The braid had kept it out of the way, so Hannibal had handed her a damp washcloth and let her take care of herself.

“Will won’t be mad,” Hannibal assured her, “He understands that accidents happen.”

“But it’s his bed,” Michelle insisted, “Not my bed. It’s not bad if it’s my bed.”

“It’s not bad at all,” Will said from the hallway, as Hannibal wrapped Michelle up in a towel, “Tètis is right. Accidents happen.”

Michelle ducked her head shyly against Hannibal’s shoulder. Will held out one of his t-shirts. “We’ll have to put her pajamas in the wash with the sheets,” He said, “But I thought this would do for now.”

If anything, Michelle seemed *ecstatic* to be given one of Will’s shirts to wear. It was a full dress on her, and she tucked her face into the collar with a small smile. “It smells like Will,” She stage-whispered to Hannibal, and Will gave her a small, hesitant smile.

“Back to bed,” Hannibal said, hoisting her onto his hip. He hesitated in the doorway, calculating. Will had handled things very well, but it was possible to push someone too far in one night. “If you need us to return to the upstairs...” Michelle’s hands clenched in Hannibal’s shirt, and Will shook his head.

“No. Well, *yes,* actually, because I’m out of sheets, but I’m coming too.”

They tucked Michelle in together, as if they’d done it a thousand times before instead of only once. Will let Hannibal take the side of the bed closest to the wall, putting himself between the two of them and the door, protective despite the fact that the danger had passed.

They slept, which was perhaps more surprising than it should have been, given the level of exhaustion they all felt. Hannibal woke early to find that Will was gone, Winston in his place, snout resting protectively over the soft ridge of Michelle’s spine. He blinked sleepily at Hannibal, and then closed his eyes again, the only motion Michelle’s rhythmic breathing. Like most young children, Michelle was typically an early riser. If she needed more rest today, Hannibal was not going to wake her. He left her under Winston’s watchful eye, finding Will in the kitchen nursing a cup of coffee.

“It’s not as good as yours,” Will told him, “But it will wake you up.” Hannibal accepted the offered mug with a quiet thank you, sipping at it slowly. It was, truth be told, *terrible* coffee, but Hannibal had spent the night before bleeding and eating powdered ‘cheese sauce.’ He was not going to complain about coffee of any sort.

Will looked down into his own mug, walls firmly in place after a night of sleep. It chafed at Hannibal. The day before had been difficult, perhaps even terrifying if he was honest with himself, but he could not deny the joy he had felt with Will opened up to him.

“About yesterday,” Will began. Hannibal knew what would come next. He should let it. He had plans for Will, a path to lead him down that would be difficult enough given their friendship. It would be nearly painful, if he let Will in further. If he allowed himself to feel compassion for Will, allowed Will to view himself as a father figure for Michelle and an equal to Hannibal. It would be better to put those things aside for now, let the plans run their course and then try to pull Will to him afterwards.

But Hannibal had always been a very patient man, and he was just so tired of being patient. And Will was beautiful, hair mussed from sleep, body tense from his previous struggles. Hannibal wished he could have seen Will fight Tobias Budge, but he would settle for seeing Will like this, in pajamas in the early morning light, nervous beneath Hannibal’s gaze.

Hannibal didn’t let Will finish his sentence. He kissed him with an urgency that bordered on desperation, cupping Will’s jaw in his hands and urging his mouth open with soft presses of his lips, a trace of his tongue along the seam of Will’s mouth. Will opened up to him, blossoming beneath Hannibal’s touch. He tasted like coffee and sleep, unpleasant on any of Hannibal’s former lovers and intoxicating on Will.

Will whimpered against his mouth, a soft sound, uncharacteristic coming from a man who was normally so rough and stern-faced. Hannibal pressed him back until he was trapped between Hannibal’s body and the fridge, nipping at his lower lip to try and urge the same sound out once more.

“Hannibal,” Will whispered when Hannibal pulled back. Hannibal shushed him with another kiss, gentler this time, a chaste press of lips. There would be time for more, later. Hannibal could not guarantee Michelle would be asleep much longer.

“I was very glad you weren’t dead, Will,” Hannibal told him, though it was a poor summary of his feelings. “That is what I will remember when I think about yesterday. You, in my office, alive and *safe*. You, and my daughter, safe and secure in my arms. I could not have lost either of you, Will. It would have destroyed me. Do not endeavor to destroy me by pulling away now that the danger has passed.”

“Okay.” This time, Will initiated the kiss, more of a smile against Hannibal’s mouth than any real intimacy. “Okay,” Will said again, and laughed, bright and hopeful in the morning sun.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Michelle has two accidents in this chapter, one while sharing a bed with Will and Hannibal, so if that squicks you read with caution. Onscreen minor character death, threats of violence towards children, *actual* violence towards children. Michelle is fine

by the end of this chapter, but there is a moment where Hannibal has reason to believe that she is dead. More violence, not against children. Panic attacks/meltdowns. Creepy nightmare imagery. References to child abuse, references to infanticide (both from earlier chapters, not new, and again off-screen). Hannibal being a weird manipulative asshole with limited access to human emotions.

In case you hadn't guessed, the thing you wanted from the chapter preview was Hannigram, and the thing you all very much didn't want was for Michelle to get hurt again. But I've been planning this from the beginning, and she actually got off a lot lighter than she did originally.

I try very hard to get across the canonical things that happen without spending half the chapter directly quoting the show, but sometimes there are only so many ways to phrase things. That being said, while every chapter up until now could have fit neatly just off-screen, I think this is the first chapter where the butterfly effect kicks in and changes things. But y'all didn't *really* want this Will to kiss Alana, now did you?

(Also. Yup. I went with the cliche 'they get together because of Fromage.' It's not even the first time I've written that particular cliche. I have zero regrets, fight me.)

Michelle references The Girl Who Trod On A Loaf by Hans Christian Anderson. It was my favorite fairy tale as a child because it is *massively* horrifying and fucked up. It's in the public domain, but all you really need to know is that the title character is an asshole and she gets sucked into hell where she is frozen as a statue and bugs crawl on her. You know, for kids! I think I was maybe ten or eleven when I read this for the first time and it stuck with me.

Will is canonically a lot better at handling other people's trauma than his own (See: Georgia Madchen). He should maybe work on that, but at least Michelle gets the reassurance she needs.

The kiss in Will's kitchen is my favorite kiss scene I've ever written, IDK guys, I just like it.

Next time! (Monday? Probably Monday. Who knows at this point. So far I've managed twice a week, I'm trying not to jinx myself): Will expresses doubts about his and Hannibal's relationship, Abigail fucks up, and Michelle considers exactly how Will fits into her life.

Dishonesty

Chapter Notes

> Heeyyyyy so you may notice the rating went up this chapter! And in case you didn't, this is your warning: I meant to warn you a chapter ahead of time and include a nice NSFW scene in the next chapter, but then these boys started making out in the goddamn hallway. You're welcome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the aftermath of Tobias Budge, they didn't talk about it. They parted the next day at Hannibal's office, sending Will off to his car as soon as Michelle could bear to be parted from him. Will left them each with a kiss. Michelle had gotten hers willingly, but Hannibal had been forced to steal his, blocking Will in by the passenger door of the Bentley, one hand on his shoulder while Michelle giggled in the back seat. It had been just the slightest brush of lips, but Will had been flushed with the promise of much more when Hannibal pulled back.

"Don't pull away," Hannibal had reminded him, "You belong here, with us."

"Yeah," Will had said, red-faced, but smiling, "Yeah, okay."

Hannibal had canceled all of his appointments for the day. For the next few days, actually, bleeding into the weekend, because police tape kept him from his own office. He spent the day at home with Michelle, guiding her through therapeutic play. She flourished under the attention; the events of the day before had been traumatizing, but she was a hardy child, and moreover, one used to trauma. Still, he change his soft silk sheets for the cheaper, cotton ones, and tucked Michelle into his own bed that night without needing to be asked.

Will called not long after Michelle had drifted off. Hannibal took the call with a glass of wine in the family room, seated at the harpsichord and imagining a cacophony of notes that might imitated Will's lightning-sharp presence in his life.

"*I just needed to… I just wanted to hear from you*," Will said, shyness creeping in inch by inch.

"We're okay," Hannibal assured him, "We are both okay." He found himself smiling in the empty room, though there was no one around who might need such a display of humanity. Will did that to him, crept in under his skin and twisted his features until Hannibal could no longer remember what was affectation and what was genuine emotion.

"*Good, that's good."* Will went silent, nothing but soft breathing and the occasional snuffle in the background from one of the dogs. Hannibal let him linger in that peace for a long moment before speaking again.

“Michelle asked after you today. Frequently. I’m afraid your absence was of particular note at bedtime. Perhaps you could indulge her tomorrow?”

“*...I feel like I’ve already forced myself on the two of you enough.”*

“Will,” Hannibal said, gentle, but firm. He would not allow Will’s pathological need to feel lonely to distance them, not now that Hannibal had decided to want him. “It was not only Michelle who missed you.”

Will’s sharp inhale sent Hannibal’s pulse fluttering, almost embarrassingly, like a school girl with her first crush. Hannibal drowned the feeling with wine, stiff and uncomfortable in his own desire.

“*Okay,”* Will finally said, *“Maybe dinner? I could… I could help tuck her in after, if you’d want me there*.”

“We always want you here,” Hannibal told him, and it was not the lie he’d meant it to be, not by half.

Michelle had been clingy through the entire night. Hannibal had seemed keen to indulge her, so Will had followed his lead, carrying Michelle through the house wherever she demanded to be. She didn’t demand to go very far, preferring to keep both Will and Hannibal in her sight at all times. Will could hardly blame her; working through her bedtime routine had been an exercise in restraint for himself as well. The idea of shutting her up in a room out of his sight was… difficult.

Will had left bath time to Hannibal, uncomfortable with the imposition, but after Michelle was clean and redressed, he joined them both in Hannibal’s room.

“She’s not yet ready to return to her own room,” Hannibal had whispered to him while Michelle dressed herself, “And I confess, I haven’t tried particularly hard to convince her.” It showed, once they both joined Michelle in Hannibal’s room, Hannibal guiding Will through carefully untangling her long, damp hair. In the two days since they’d spent the night in Will’s living room, Michelle had slowly begun to take over the room. Hannibal’s large, imposing bed now held a menagerie of stuffed animals, and the nightstand was overflowing with children’s books and a small smattering of craft supplies, beads and string and a half-finished bracelet that Michelle explained was meant for Abigail.

“I was making Nina one,” She said quietly, as Will moved aside so Hannibal could braid her hair, “But I guess I don’t have to, now.”

Will did not have a good answer for that, and not for the first time, he considered Michelle lucky to have a psychiatrist for a parent.

“If you would like to make Nina a bracelet, you should,” Hannibal told her, tucking her into the center of the bed with a small stuffed tiger, “You could bring it to the funeral, or keep it in a box for yourself.”

“Put it with the hat,” Michelle said quietly, “I can’t wear it anymore.”

Will thought of the tiny, mouse-eared hat, of Michelle’s sheer joy to be wearing it and Nina’s quiet, pleased smile, and he ached. “We can set it all aside for you,” He said, continuing Hannibal’s suggestion, “You don’t have to decide what to do with any of this yet.”

“When Grandma died, Mommy made a shadow box,” Michelle suggested timidly. It was the first remotely positive association Will had heard her make with her birth parents, and it startled him slightly to realize that she might have good memories to intertwine with the bad. It should not have; He had been a police officer, he knew abusers could flip the switch between hot and cold easily.

“If that’s what you want,” Hannibal agreed. He dug a book from the pile, handing it over to Will. Peter Pan, easy and simple, full of wonder. “But for now, Will is going to read you a story, and you are going to get some rest.”

Supposedly, the bedtime routine was brief, but Will actually made it through a good chunk of Peter Pan before Michelle could finally be coaxed into something resembling sleep. Even then, she fussed wordlessly when Will set the book aside, eyes half closed. Hannibal soothed her with a kiss to the forehead, ushering Will out when he lingered.

“If we don’t leave now, she’ll rouse again, and we’ll have to read through the entire book.”

“Has that happened before?”

Hannibal looked distinctly unamused, though Will was smirking.

“More times than I would like to count.”

“Pretty sure you’re supposed to put your foot down then,” Will pointed out. Hannibal looked away from him. Will had never seen anything resembling guilt or shame on Hannibal’s face, but he could read between the lines. He laughed, much to Hannibal’s apparent surprise.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Will said, and then, on a whim, reached out to hold onto Hannibal’s hand. Hannibal accepted him easily, shifting his grip until their fingers slid together. It was surprisingly middle school, and yet Will didn’t mind. “It’s just… You give off this aura of ‘perfect parent.’ It’s nice to see you have flaws.”

“No parent is perfect,” Hannibal insisted, though the hint of pink coloring his face seemed more pleasure than embarrassment, “And a little extra reading has yet to ruin a child.”

“She’s got you trained,” Will teased, and then absolutely *had* to kiss the indignant frown that crossed Hannibal’s face.

They hadn’t even made it down the hallway properly. There were two fingers of whiskey calling Will’s name from the family room, but as Hannibal opened up to him, Will found he couldn’t make himself take another step towards the stairs.

It was moments like this, when Hannibal turned suddenly and pinned Will up against a door frame, forgetting his composure and ignoring the ominous wobbling of one of his paintings, that Will forgot. He forgot all the reasons he had lain awake the night before trying to convince himself to tell Hannibal this couldn't happen anymore. He forgot that something was wrong with him. He forgot all of that, and instead wondered why they hadn't started doing this sooner, months ago, even. Maybe all the way back, before Abigail, when Hannibal had shown up in the doorway of Will's motel room with breakfast, and Will had stood there in his underwear looking as far from sexually appealing as it was possible when one was not wearing any real clothes. Hannibal pushed forward, pressing a thigh between both of Will's, and Will decided every second spent doing anything but this had been a waste.

Will never knew what to do with his hands, no matter how many ill-advised hook-ups and trysts he went through. He settled them on Hannibal's shoulders, trailed them down his side to his hips. Wondered, maybe, if he should brave a little lower, when suddenly Hannibal shifted to press that thigh ever so slightly further up.

They touched *everywhere*, now, chest to chest, Hannibal's thigh up against Will's groin, the heat of Hannibal's answering arousal against Will's hip. Will let out a low moan against Hannibal's mouth, and that was enough to finally break them both free of their haze.

Hannibal pulled away, his usual calm composure gone, replaced by a slight reddening of his cheeks, a slick, kiss-damp mouth, a few stray hairs falling from their gel across his forehead. "Not here," He finally said, once he'd caught his breath. Will winced, and Hannibal hastened to reassure him, one hand on his hip and the other tangling lightly in Will's curls. "Not *never*," He amended, "Just not *here*."

They'd only made it a few feet, Will realized, Hannibal's bedroom door still in his line of sight. Will had been flushed from the kiss already, but now he went a deep red, ducking his head. He hadn't lost control like this since college.

"Will," Hannibal whispered, the heat of his breath still close enough to brush Will's mouth, "By 'not never' I meant 'as soon as I can get you out of this hallway.'"

The sound Will made was not dignified enough to be called a moan, more of a squeak, and he immediately snapped a hand over his mouth, seconds too late to hold it back. Hannibal looked immensely pleased with himself, an expression that was growing as familiar to Will as his own features. Despite his embarrassment, he let Hannibal take him by the hand and lead him down the stairs, back into the family room. There was a couch there, quite possibly the most fantastic couch Will had ever seen, although he was possibly biased by the way Hannibal sprawled across it when Will shoved him. He went down easily, for a man as sturdy as he was, putting up not a single bit of resistance when Will laid him out and crawled over him.

The couch, as fantastic as it was, was not quite made to have two grown men of decent height and build lying across it. Will could barely keep his balance, hardly enough room to sit with a knee aside each of Hannibal's thighs. He made up for it by laying himself out over Hannibal's chest, kissing him again before he lost his nerve.

Kissing Hannibal was never going to get old. Somehow, it was different every time, sometimes soft little presses against each other, and sometimes like this, open-mouthed and wet and slightly desperate, not just on Will's behalf, but Hannibal's as well. Hannibal arched up beneath him with a soft groan, until they connected in every place that ached. Will felt a hint of pride; *he* had done that, he was shredding Hannibal Lecter's carefully practiced control with each little rock of his hips.

"I haven't done this in a while," Will warned, carefully unbuttoning each little piece of Hannibal's suit jacket and shirt.

"Then trust in my guidance," Hannibal said, yanking carelessly at his own tie, "when I remind you it's even better with less clothing."

Will laughed, muffling the sound against the suddenly bared skin of Hannibal's throat, pressing kisses down until he could nip gently at Hannibal's collarbone. Hannibal gripped Will's hip and ground up against him, struggling awkwardly out of his things until he was bare-chested beneath Will. Will watched in shocked amusement as Hannibal shoved shirt, tie, and jacket all to the floor in a heap.

"Did you want to hang those up or… Fold them, maybe?"

Hannibal glared up at him. "You've already creased and wrinkled the fabric, no use pretending they're not destined for the dry-cleaners."

Will opened his mouth to apologize and suddenly found himself looking *up* at Hannibal, pinned between Hannibal's body and the back of the couch. He was not going to complain.

"Don't you *dare*," Hannibal told him, tugging until Will's own shirt joined the heap on the floor, "If I ever complain about your hands on me, please assume I'm delirious with fever."

"Gotcha," Will said, muffled against the mouth that was suddenly back against his own. Hannibal was right, it was better like this, the near-smooth plains of Will's chest pressed up against coarse hair and compact muscle. Hannibal was surprisingly fit beneath all the layers, and Will ran appreciative hands over his chest, tugging lightly at the hair he found there and passing his thumbs over Hannibal's nipples. Hannibal shuddered, body rolling down against Will's, and Will did it again, and again, until they were in constant motion, rocking against each other.

"Pants," Will gasped, eyes fluttering closed.

"Dry-cleaners," Hannibal reminded him, and proved his point by grabbing Will by the thigh, spreading him open a little further and grinding down against him. Their cocks brushed together, trapped up against each other in the tight space. Even through layers of fabric Will could feel the thick shape of him, could picture what Hannibal would look like when they had more time to explore and learn each other.

It was that thought that lingered in Will's mind as he came, the thought of seeing and touching, *tasting*. Will groaned and arched his back, shaking with the force of his orgasm as Hannibal worked through his own release above him.

Hannibal was far too polite to collapse on top of Will (Thankfully, as the size difference was *just* enough that it might have been uncomfortable), but it was a near miss. Instead, he crowded Will further against the back of the couch, until they could lie side by side, albeit still pressed up against each other in every way. Will caught his breath against the skin of Hannibal's throat, pressing a kiss there when he thought he could manage his own thoughts again.

"I'm thinking *maybe* we shouldn't call our conversations 'appointments' anymore," He said, grinning against Hannibal's pulse, "Unless you were looking for a very sudden and unpleasant change in career."

"You were never my patient," Hannibal murmured against Will's hair, "And thank goodness for that. The amount of ethical violations..."

"Don't worry, I won't sue you. Not until after our first fight, at the very least."

When Hannibal laughed, Will could feel it reverberate through his own chest. He closed his eyes and smiled.

Despite his misgivings, Will went to the funeral. It had been Michelle's request, passed on through Hannibal, and Will was unable to say no to her. He was beginning to understand a lot about Hannibal's somewhat indulgent parenting.

Michelle answered the door in a black dress with black tights, but also with her mouse-eared hat crammed onto her head at an angle, as if she'd never taken it off the last time Nina had put it on her. Hannibal stood behind her, dressed impeccably and looking uncomfortably at Michelle's back. Well, Will could play bad guy if he had to. He knelt in front of Michelle, reaching out to place a hand on her shoulder. "Honey, you can't wear that hat to the funeral."

Michelle looked at him, eyes darting back and forth across her face like she hadn't yet decided how much focus to give him. "You said I could do whatever I wanted with my Nina things."

Will looked over her shoulder to Hannibal, who stared back. Well, that explained why she was wearing the hat to begin with.

"It's just that… It's a funeral, Michelle, it's a very sad occasion. It might upset somebody."

Michelle frowned, reaching up to tug the ends of the hat until it sank down over her eyes. "It's my Nina hat. Nina made it. I wanna wear it."

Will looked at Hannibal again. Hannibal continued to look back, completely unhelpful. Will sighed.

"Alright. Wear the hat."

They had a service, then a viewing. Apparently, Nina was to be cremated afterwards. Will

found himself relieved; he wasn't sure how Michelle would handle an actual burial. According to Hannibal, it was technically her first funeral. She had been to one for her grandmother, but was too young to remember it, and her social worker at the time had wisely suggested keeping her from her parents' funerals. She and Hannibal had done something in private for her little brother, just the two of them.

Hannibal cried during the service, which surprised Will a bit. His tears were quiet and subtle, but they welled up anyway. What was more surprising was the complete lack of emotion on Michelle's face. She was an unusual child, occasionally a bit stilted, but she was not typically robotic. During the service, however, she had remained stone faced and passive. She allowed Hannibal to hold her, lifting her high enough to see the casket and the preacher, but she did not cry or whimper or give any sign of distress. It seemed to catch Hannibal's attention as much as Will's; when the service was over, he handed her into Will's arms.

"Would you mind?" Hannibal asked, "I'd like to offer Mrs. Ruiz my condolences and..." He trailed off, eyes on Michelle, but the meaning was clear: he worried about Michelle's unusual reaction further upsetting the crying woman up front.

"We'll be fine," Will promised him, adjusting Michelle on his hip. She folded easily into him, seeming more bored than actually upset. Will took her with him to the side of the room, tucking himself behind a plant, out of the way of mourning loved ones. "Alright, Michelle. Talk to me."

"I don't like it," She said immediately, a pout stealing across her face, "Everyone is crying and praying. Nina would be bored."

"Funerals are like that," Will explained, "It makes people feel better."

"*I* don't feel better."

Well, neither did Will, but he suspected that comment would do more harm than good. "Everyone grieves in their own way," He said softly, "This helps a lot of people."

"Does it help *you*?" Michelle's voice was accusing. Will suspected she might be disappointed if he said yes, though there was little chance of that.

"I didn't know Nina. We only met once," Will reminded her. It didn't do much to wipe the frown from her face.

"Not *today*," She stressed, "When other people die. You're old, you probably know lots of dead people."

"That was rude," Will chided, because he was sure Hannibal would want him to. In reality, he was stifling a small snicker. He was surely going to be a terrible influence on this kid. "But no," He finally admitted, "This isn't the kind of thing that helps me."

"What helps you?"

Whiskey, truthfully, but Will didn't want to be *that* bad an influence. "You have to find what helps you on your own," He said instead, "Is there anything you want right now? Something that might help you?" Something that might strip away that dead, blank look that looked so horrifying on a child's face.

Michelle looked around at all the crying, talking people. Across the room, Hannibal was still trapped with Nina's parents. Michelle looked longingly at him for a moment before turning back to Will.

"I wanna see Nina."

The body was *wrong*. Michelle stood next to the casket, one hand wrapped in Will's and the other running a satin ribbon from her dress, over and over again.

The makeup was neutral, just the tiniest bit of pink to the body's cheeks. Nina liked bright colors; She'd once made Michelle up with the most vibrant purple sparkles across her eyelids, and now there were no sparkles at all. And the dress was ugly. Boring. Nina didn't wear *pantyhose*. She didn't like it. She reached out with her hand to prod sharply at the face, and had just enough time to notice that it felt cold and smooth and not at all like a person, before Will yanked her back roughly.

"Ow!" Michelle complained, glaring up at Will.

"You can't do that," He lectured, "People will be upset."

"You said I could see Nina," She told Will, accusing, "You and Tètis said people went to funerals to say goodbye, but I can't say goodbye because she's not *here*."

Will looked at her with a tightly squashed frown. She'd said something wrong, but she didn't know *what*. Will knelt down before her, holding both her hands in his.

"This is her," Will told her, and she knew he would never lie to her, but she didn't know why he would say these things.

"It's *not*," She insisted. "It doesn't even look like her!" Her voice pitched up, she sounded young, *younger*, and she didn't like it, nor did she like the sharp prick of tears at the corners of her eyes.

"This is her," Will repeated, firmer, like Tètis when she was having a meltdown and he wanted her to listen close, "This is *all that's left*."

"It's not!" She shrieked, and lashed out, yanking her hands free of Will's grasp. She swung for the casket. Will caught her before she could hit it, swinging her up into his arms. Michelle shrieked in wordless out rage, shoving blindly at his face and chest. People were staring. She didn't care. "It's not! It's not her, you said I could say goodbye! You lied! I hate you I hate you I *hate you*!"

“Then hate me,” Will whispered, crushing her against his chest. She swung her hands and missed and missed, unable to properly get to him with how he’d pinned her. “Go ahead, let it out.” He carried her towards the back of the room, Tėtis hurrying after him while Michelle sobbed. She didn’t know when she’d started crying. She didn’t know if she was upset or just angry, everything felt too big for her body, she screamed and shrieked, and breathed in a harsh breath of cold, fresh air as Will carried her outside and Tėtis bundled them both up into his arms, pinning her between the two of them, and everything was wrong but this was okay, this was where she fit. If she could just stay here, it would be okay.

More than a week after the funeral, over two weeks into this new thing with Hannibal, real life crashed back into Will’s bubble. He spent the morning on a beach in West Virginia. He was staring up at a 20 foot human totem pole, right up until the second he wasn’t. He looked around Hannibal’s waiting room, panic mounting in his chest. He didn’t remember driving there. He didn’t remember leaving the beach at all, and suddenly the room seemed to tilt sideways.

“Will?”

Hannibal, in the doorway, coat on, lights out behind him, clearly getting ready to leave the office. Everything tilted back into place.

“I don’t remember coming here,” Will rasped, hands beginning to shake at his sides, “I don’t remember driving- I- I was on a beach in Grafton, West Virginia, and then I blinked and… And I woke up here. But I wasn’t *asleep*, I don’t-”

“Grafton, West Virginia is a three and a half hour drive from here,” Hannibal said, voice slow and steady but eyes wide.

“I know!” Will yelped, tearing at his hair. Hannibal moved so quickly, Will could barely follow the motion, tugging Will into his arms and gently pulling his hands free of his curls.

“I’m not your child,” Will protested halfheartedly, but he let himself be guided into the office. Hannibal pulled him to the chaise, pressing Will to lay down on it.

“But you need me,” Hannibal told him, pressing a hand to his forehead. Will tucked his face into the motion. Hannibal’s skin was cool and soothing against the flush of Will’s own. “You lost time. You’re dissociating, Will. A psyche that endures repeated abuse-”

“I’m not your child!” Will repeated, forcing himself up into a sitting position. “And I’m not abused!” His hands flapped in his lap and he rocked himself, the anxiety bubbling up in his stomach like boiling, sticky tar.

“You have an empathy disorder. What you feel is overwhelming you-”

“I know!” Will shook his head, tucked his hands over his face, fingers tap-tap-tapping away at the skin. “I know, I know, but what the hell else do you want me to do-”

“Anything but continue to ignore it, that is the abuse I’m referring to. Jack Crawford offered you a chance to quit, you didn’t take it. Why?”

“Because I’m saving lives!”

“And that feels good?”

“Generally, yeah.”

“Good enough to completely ignore your own needs?” Will peered up at Hannibal. Hannibal had never yelled at him. Hannibal, as far as Will could tell, never yelled *period*. Yet now, his voice was slightly raised, his eyes narrowed. He looked angry. “I’m your friend, Will,” Hannibal continued, “And more than that, I thought. I don’t care about the lives you save, I care about *your* life.”

“I’m useful,” Will whispered, “Don’t ask me to go back to when I wasn’t.”

“You *are* useful,” Hannibal agreed, kneeling before Will and taking his hands. Will was suddenly reminded of his own actions with Michelle, trying to calm her when she grew irrational. He wanted it to irk him more than it did. “But not just to Jack Crawford, Will. You’re useful to *us*, to myself and to Michelle. And to Abigail,” He added, “We need you.”

Will looked at him, searching for any sign of deception.

“*I* need you,” Hannibal amended, leaning forward to kiss him. Will let him. For a long moment, he lost himself in the soft, subtle press of lips, then pulled back, shaking his head.

“You don’t, you don’t see it. I’m losing time, I’m hallucinating. You shouldn’t…” He wanted to tell Hannibal to back off. He couldn’t make himself do it. “Maybe I should get a brain scan,” Will said, although he doubted it would do much good. He’d always felt crazy. It was just that now, he had proof.

“You’re looking in the wrong corner, Will. I’ve told you what stress can do to you. What you’re doing to yourself.”

Will flinched back, away from Hannibal. “I don’t want to be crazy.”

“I’m worried about you, Will,” Hannibal said with a sigh, “But I don’t think you’re crazy. I think you’re overwhelmed and overworked.”

Will did not soothe easily, but he did eventually soothe. Hannibal sat himself down on the chaise, tugging Will against his side and holding him until the tension eventually left.

The sweet, heated scent had grown worse in the past week, but Hannibal was still confident in his ability to care for Will. Three and a half hours was a lot of time to lose, but Hannibal would just have to keep a closer eye on him, and that was easy enough with Will’s newfound desire to be close to him. Hannibal wasn’t yet ready to give up the options Will’s illness offered him. He was more malleable this way, easily coaxed. Hannibal felt certain he could guide him towards a beautiful violence, given more time, and away from Jack Crawford’s

insistent investigations. If Jack kept nudging Will from crime scene to crime scene, Will would eventually figure Hannibal out. Hannibal intended to keep the truth from Will until he could break the news himself, preferably after Will's own becoming, when he was sure they would be connected properly. When he was sure Will would not let a misguided sense of morality break him from Hannibal's arms.

So for now, he would keep Will sick. It was not a decision that came easily to Hannibal. In fact, it sat heavy and uneasy in his stomach, an unexpected flaw in an otherwise perfect plan. He had not expected to feel concern for Will, not when Hannibal was so carefully managing and guiding him, but the concern had come anyway. Hannibal managed it by allowing himself the soft touches his body and mind seemed to crave, pressing kisses to Will's hair when Will tucked further into his side.

"Come to dinner," He suggested, holding tighter when Will stiffened.

"I feel like I'm losing my mind," Will mumbled against Hannibal's collar, "You shouldn't have to deal with that."

"There is nowhere I would rather see you than right here against me, Will."

Will shifted in his arms. Hannibal only released him when he showed no sign of settling back down. Will straightened up once more, looking Hannibal in the eyes, Hannibal one of only a handful of people who ever received that privilege.

The kisses were good, though they'd yet to lead to much, but Hannibal admittedly found them better when *Will* initiated them. Hannibal would not hesitate to take the affection they clearly both desired, but a connection freely given by a man who connected to no one was all the more sweet for its rarity. Hannibal let Will kiss him, let him coax his mouth open and scrabble for control against the heated waves of fever. Later, once they were no longer in his office and Michelle was in bed, perhaps Hannibal would let him grasp for control once more.

It was supposed to be a family visit, but everyone was kind of mad. Or at least, they were all making the 'upset' face.

Michelle was on Abigail's bed with her, where she had been since they walked in and Abigail had patted the spot next to her. Mostly, Abigail seemed to want to use her as a teddy bear, like she thought maybe Tėtis and Will wouldn't be upset with her if she had Michelle in her lap. But Michelle was not going to complain, because it meant she got some Abigail snuggles, something her life had been sorely lacking.

Abigail was tense against Michelle's back, hard and stiff where she should have been soft. Tėtis had on his stern face, not one he used for Michelle, but one he used for strangers and his opera friends. Will, though, Will looked openly angry, distressed. He was always vaguely damp lately, but today he looked like he might actually burst into flames.

Michelle didn't really get it. If Abigail wanted to write a book about what happened to her, she should. Michelle would read it eagerly, since nobody seemed to want to actually tell her

what they were talking about. Instead, they talked over her in that irritating way grown-ups had of pretending children weren't in the room.

"It will not be only yourself you drag into the public eye," Tėtis told Abigail, "Whatever you write, you write about all of us."

"Freddie said," Abigail replied, tightening her arms around Michelle, "She said you guys were important. But I wouldn't let her write anything mean about you. And I didn't answer the questions she asked."

"She asked you about us?" Will asked. One hand tapped repeatedly against his thigh. Michelle watched it with no small amount of fascination; she liked seeing her own tics in others. "What did she ask?"

Abigail's arms tightened again. Michelle squirmed until she loosened up, carefully catching Abigail's hands in her own so it wouldn't keep happening.

"Are you guys together?" Abigail finally asked, "Like, *together*, together? Like, dating?"

Will froze mid-pace, even his hand stilling against his thigh. Tėtis had that look on his face, that proud look he got when Michelle was paying attention properly. Michelle didn't understand either of those responses.

"Well, *yeah*," She said, tilting her head back to look at Abigail. Abigail looked back, face scrunched up, but whatever her expression, Michelle couldn't read it while upside down. "Why wouldn't they be?"

"Why wouldn't-" Will caught himself, shaking his head and leaving his question unfinished. Grown-ups were weird. At least Tėtis was smiling, he understood. Of course Will and Tėtis were together, they'd only been perfect for each other like, *forever*. Michelle had been hopeful, but she'd honestly started to think it was never going to happen. She liked that they were together. Now all that needed to happen was for Abigail to get out of the special home, and then all of her favorite people could be a family, a real one.

"Yeah," Will finally said, when everyone had been quiet way too long. "Yeah, Hannibal and I are together."

"Oh. You weren't going to tell me?"

Will flinched, and Tėtis stepped in. "We weren't keeping it from you, not intentionally. It's very new, Abigail, we haven't told anyone, just yet."

"And we'd rather not end up the front page of TattleCrime.com," Will added, some of his earlier anger creeping back in. Michelle pushed herself back against Abigail's chest, away from that anger. She didn't like it, didn't like the way it flooded his entire face and took away *her* Will.

"Are you upset?" Tėtis asked Abigail. Michelle felt her shrug.

“I mean, you guys are the closest thing I have to parents. Who doesn’t want their parents to be together?” They were good words, the best words, but there was something funny about Abigail’s voice, like she didn’t quite believe it. Michelle tilted back to look at her again and wondered when her family was finally going to figure out they *were* a family.

The next time Hannibal visited Abigail, he left Will behind. He was forced to bring Michelle, still unable to find a replacement for Nina, but she was a good girl. He sent her off to a corner with her coloring books and stood by the window to wait for Abigail. She did not disappoint, not this time, anyway.

“It can be comforting, to see the corpse of a monster and know it cannot rise again,” He said when she arrived.

“Nick Boyle wasn’t a monster,” She said softly, stepping closer to him despite the sour odor of fear that rose off of her in waves. “Although I sometimes feel like one.” She would rather put herself in arms reach than risk Michelle overhearing her. That instinct won her a point where she now held very few. Not that Hannibal had any worries about the things Michelle heard. He had trained her to listen, and if she wanted to know, she would know.

“Is that why you uncovered his body?” Abigail flinched, her eyes darting over to where Michelle continued to color, humming a wordless tune and looking for all the world as if she had no idea they were in the room with her. She was laying it on a bit too thick for Hannibal’s tastes, but it seemed to ease Abigail’s discomfort.

“Please, look at me when I’m speaking to you,” Hannibal said sternly, “She is not the child I’m concerned about right now.”

“I’m not a child,” Abigail protested, a teenager’s automatic defense rather than any real conviction. Hannibal continued as if she hadn’t spoken.

“It can also be upsetting when a parent or parental figure forms a connection with someone else. Did you worry that when I forged a relationship with Will, your secrets would become mine to share?”

“Aren’t they?” Abigail peeked up at him through her eyelashes, a deference that might have worked on her biological parents but was wasted on Hannibal.

“Will remains just as blinded by his affection for you as he has always been,” Hannibal told her, noting the way her shoulders slumped with the relief, “I have not told him a thing. I’m not sure he’d be willing to believe it if I did.”

“I needed to control *something*,” Abigail finally admitted. Hannibal had suspected as much. She was a clever girl, but not clever enough. He could not predict every motion she would make, or he would have hidden Nick Boyle’s body without her, but he could see her motivations as easily as if she’d cracked open her diary before him. “I’m not afraid of them finding the body anymore. There’s nothing else he can do to hurt me.”

“Nothing else on *his* part, no, but you defanged Nick Boyle before you buried him. There was no guarantee he would have been found at all. Now there is a body, something to look at, something to investigate. Jack Crawford already had his eyes on you, Abigail, and it is not only you who has something to bury with this body.”

Abigail bit down hard on her bottom lip, until the pink flesh went white with the pressure. She looked unbearably disappointed with his disappointment in her, and the fear that had clouded her still lingered over her features. She could not predict what Hannibal would do, and that would work in his favor, as would her carefully given affections.

“I need to be able to trust you, Abigail. When you draw suspicion on yourself, you draw suspicion onto me. And it is not only the two of us who will suffer for it.” Hannibal let his eyes drift away from Abigail and towards the corner. He saw the exact moment it clicked for her, she jerked back and stared at Michelle with undisguised horror, before she turned back towards Hannibal.

“I would never do anything to hurt her,” She swore fervently, “I even told Freddie Lounds I’d call the whole book deal off if she even asked about her. I’d never-”

“And yet you have,” Hannibal said smoothly, letting the words sink in, “Tell me, what do you think happens to Michelle if I am arrested as your accomplice? I would be, Abigail, there would be no claims of self-defense now that they know we hid the body.”

“I won’t…. I wouldn’t...”

Hannibal sighed, pulling Abigail in for a hug. She was stiff in his arms, but she received so little affection as it was that she couldn’t bring herself to pull away. “I only ask that you be more cautious,” He told her, “Confide these worries in me, and I will do what damage control I can.”

Hannibal didn’t linger to soothe or comfort her. He left her with those thoughts bouncing around her head, a punishment for risking both of them in her carelessness.

Will went to Hannibal the second he realized. He tried to tell himself it was something romantic, seeking affection and comfort from someone he knew would readily give it, but he wasn’t a romantic and he knew that. Really, he went to Hannibal because he *knew*. He couldn’t piece together how he knew it, but it was as clear to him as the truth about Abigail.

“Abigail killed Nicholas Boyle,” He said to Hannibal, and was not at all surprised to hear Hannibal’s response.

“I know.”

Will closed his eyes, sucking in a deep breath. He nodded, because of *course* Hannibal knew, why wouldn’t he, he had a knack for finding himself knee deep in situations like this. “Tell me *why* you know?”

“I helped her dispose of the body.”

“Evidently not well enough!” Will growled, and it only displeased him further that Hannibal didn’t seem the least bit remorseful. Concerned, yes, but there was no regret on his features. It was as if the Hannibal before Budge, before *them*, had returned, smooth-faced and even-tempered, no human emotions to speak of.

“*Why*, Hannibal?”

“You know why,” Hannibal said, slowly rising from his desk, “Jack Crawford is already determined to hang Abigail for her father’s crimes. He would have twisted her motives, made self-defense look like premeditation.” Hannibal approached Will like he was a scared animal, hands up, placating. It made Will want to scream. “Abigail is no more a killer than you are for Hobbs, or I for Tobias Budge. It was self-defense, Will.”

“Which is exactly what we could have told a judge!” But it was too late for that now, they both knew it. Hannibal’s hand came to land on Will’s shoulder and Will jerked away, relishing in the genuine hurt that finally broke Hannibal’s stone facade.

“Have you told Jack, then?”

“No,” Will whispered, and looked away so he couldn’t see relief on Hannibal’s features.

“Do you plan to?”

Will kept his eyes on the ground, but he reached out for Hannibal’s wrist and held it, keeping him close. “You know I can’t.” Hannibal’s tension relaxed under Will’s touch. Will turned into him and allowed himself to be held, pulled into Hannibal’s chest and gripped tight as if even now, Hannibal thought he might leave.

“I only did what I had to,” Hannibal whispered to him, “We are her fathers now, for all intents and purposes. We are the family she has left.”

Will nodded against his chest. He could see it now, as if he’d been there himself. He would have wanted to tell the truth, but he knew that Hannibal would have convinced him just as he’d convinced himself. In the end, he would have changed nothing. He would have buried a body with Hannibal to protect Abigail Hobbs, and the thought both terrified and exhilarated him.

“No more secrets,” Will insisted, using a soft grip in Hannibal’s hair to guide eye contact, seeking promises, “No more lies, Hannibal. If we’re in this together, then we’re a *team*.”

“No more secrets,” Hannibal promised, and Will let him repeat the promise against his mouth, whisper soft and achingly needed.

Michelle didn’t like Freddie Lounds. She was pretty, and she had the most *fantastic* hair, Michelle’s hair was pin straight and didn’t so much as wave without a lot of effort first, but she was very, very *rude*. Michelle knew that without quite understanding what any of the grown-ups were talking about, kept distracted in her seat by Abigail, who gently redirected her if ever she seemed too curious about the conversation going on at the other end of the

table. But as much as Michelle didn't like Miss Lounds, she loved Will and Abigail, and it was Important that they have Miss Lounds for dinner. Tėtis had said so, and Michelle was not going to argue if it meant Abigail could come for dinner. Michelle was a careful listener, and she had worried that Tėtis's anger, clear to her if not to anyone else, would keep her away from Abigail.

"Do I still get to keep her?" Michelle asked once everyone was gone, voice soft and hesitant. Tėtis looked away from the dishes, giving her the attention she needed. "Abigail. Do I still get to keep her?"

"I would like you to," Tėtis said, carefully scrubbing away at the china even as he kept his focus on her, "But that is up to Abigail."

Michelle nodded, squishing a ball of clay back and forth between her hands. "She did a bad thing, didn't she?"

"She broke my trust," Tėtis confirmed, "And risked our entire family by doing so."

Michelle huffed out a breath, turning away so she didn't have to look at Tėtis. His eyes said too much right now, they made her feel itchy and unfocused. "But she's still ours?"

"For as long as we can keep her," Tėtis agreed, "We don't remove people from our family based on one mistake. What matters is what Abigail does next."

Michelle hummed her agreement, although truthfully, it was all a bit beyond her. She climbed onto her stool, still up against the counter from when she'd helped with the sides, and rolled the clay out methodically until she had a long, thin loop. Only then had enough time passed for her to finally brave her next question.

"Does Will love us?"

Tėtis paused. Tėtis did not pause for much, and it alarmed Michelle. She wondered if she could take it back, pretend she hadn't asked, but then Tėtis answered her.

"I believe he does, yes. I'm not certain he knows it himself, but I would be very surprised if he didn't."

That was a good answer, it made Michelle feel warm. "Good. I want him to love us." She smushed the clay back together and then began to roll it out once more. "Do you… Do you remember when I came to live here and I asked you if you were going to be my new Daddy?"

"I remember," Tėtis said slowly, and she could feel his eyes on her even though she wouldn't let herself look. "I told you that I would be whatever you needed me to be for you, and that if you wanted me to be your father, I would be honored, but that you needn't use a word that made you uncomfortable."

Michelle nodded, taking a deep breath before the next part, the *hard* part. "I think… I think I would like Will to be my Daddy, if that's okay."

Tėtis didn’t answer her right away. He turned off the water, setting the dish he held aside instead of drying it immediately like he usually would, and then plucked Michelle from her stool and into his arms.

“I would very much like it if you extended that honor to Will,” Tėtis said, pressing his words against her temple like a secret, “But Will is not quite ready yet.”

“But you said he loves us.”

“I did. But this is all very new to him, little one. He hasn’t been preparing like we have for him. He needs some time to adjust. And… Some things will need to be taken care of first.”

Michelle stiffened in his arms, pressing herself back until she could look at Tėtis’s face and watch for cues. “Is something bad going to happen to Will?”

If there was a secret to be learned, Tėtis’s face would not give it away to Michelle. “Not if I can guide him away from it,” He told her, and she knew even at eight years old that it was not a ‘no,’ “But I promise you, that if it does, I will pull Will out of it in the end. Alright?”

A promise from Tėtis was a commandment written in stone, like the bible stories Grandma had once read to her, and Mommy after Grandma died, when Michelle wanted her back. Michelle nodded. “Alright, Tėtis.”

Tėtis set her down with a swift kiss to her cheek, letting her return to her clay. Michelle worked it between her hands for a long moment before she snuck another glance at Tėtis, now finishing up their plates. “Tėtis? Do *you* love *Will?”*

And Tėtis, after a long moment, smiled.

Chapter End Notes

I don't write smut usually please don't hate me if it's bad.

Soooo if you follow me on Tumblr you already know this, but the reason this was two days late is I spontaneously took a trip to the beach this weekend, and I'm not writing gay Hannibal fanfiction in front of my inlaws. Trust me, bad idea. So nothing got written until Monday and then it just. kept. going. Like goddamn guys take a breath once in a while!

I know I have comments to respond to but I am supposed to be going to the grocery store right now which is also why you aren't getting my usual in-depth author's notes or a chapter preview, I am so sorry. If you have any questions please ask in the comments and I will get back to you ASAP!

Also serious question do I have to mark for dub!con if Will is totally on board with the sex but probably wouldn't be if he knew the sixteen different ways Hannibal was lying

to him/manipulating him (And everyone else)?

Questioning

Chapter Notes

Parts of this chapter are NSFW.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will already felt crazy. Hannibal's near-constant need to check up on him was only making it worse. *How have you been sleeping, Will? Draw a clock, Will. Do a grounding exercise, Will. Come home with me and let me feed you, Will.*

Sometimes, these demands were issued to 'Dear Will' instead, and that eased a little bit of Will's irritation, although he was embarrassed that Hannibal could play him so easily. He didn't like being mollycoddled, but he liked being cared for. There was a difference. When Hannibal became too much, it chafed at Will's skin, made him want to run away. But sometimes, there was just the right amount of concern, just the right amount of care.

Tonight was one of those times. Michelle had been tucked into bed in her own room, well over an hour ago, long enough to be surely, firmly asleep. Will was on his back in Hannibal's bed, both of them stripped down to their undergarments, boxers for Will and something flimsy and silk, though still unmistakably masculine, for Hannibal that Will was sorely tempted to ruin.

"I have to leave soon," Will murmured against Hannibal's collarbone, "It's a long drive."

This was as far as they ever got, still hidden away from each other, sating their needs with hands and hips, but no further. Partially because of Will's drive, and partially because of Will's fear. There was no turning back, once they took that step. It would make this something concrete, something permanent. Something a lot harder to set Hannibal free from. It would make the longing harder, when Will was inevitably left on his own once more.

"You could stay the night," Hannibal said, like he did every time, the words planted against Will's skin with little nips.

"The dogs," Will reminded him. They both knew it would be easy for Will to set the dogs up to be fine for one night, *before* coming over, and both also knew he never did on purpose, to give him the escape.

Hannibal sighed against Will's skin, trailing kisses down to Will's nipple until he could suck and nip, until Will's back arched and he was almost, *almost* convinced.

"H-hannibal," Will said, more a moan than an actual complaint, "There's no time."

“Just like this, then,” Hannibal whispered, lining up against him, chest to chest, the thick heat of him separated from Will’s own arousal by scant, thin fabric. If Will moved just the right way, he knew he could slide free of his boxers and press against Hannibal’s flesh. He knew, also, that if he did, he would never have the will to leave this bed.

“Just like this,” Will repeated, twisting his hips up against Hannibal, letting Hannibal guide him towards satisfaction.

Hannibal offered him safety, security, but he could not be there every hour of every day to save Will from himself. Will blinked and woke up standing in his front lawn. He blinked and his grocery shopping was done, complete with six different kinds of cereal he didn’t even eat. He blinked, and he was *killing her, killing her, cut open her face and see what’s underneath, see the truth, see, do you see?*

“I contaminated a crime scene,” He said, bursting into Hannibal’s office, with neither invitation nor appointment. Hannibal might have been upset if he’d had a patient, but Will knew his schedule, he knew when he had patients and when he had paperwork.

Michelle was unexpected, however, seated on the floor in front of the desk with a delicate baby-doll and a plastic bottle. Apparently, good baby-sitters were hard to come by when the last one had been brutally murdered. Will spared a moment of thought to wonder where Hannibal hid her when patients were around, before Hannibal shooed her out into the waiting room, sealing them into privacy.

“I’m sorry,” Will babbled immediately, “I didn’t know she would be here...”

“It’s not your fault,” Hannibal assured him, “I’m afraid I’ve had to sacrifice my private exit for a place to keep her after school. But she’s safe where she is, she doesn’t need any of your worry. Tell me what’s wrong.”

They were no longer psychiatrist and patient, if they had ever truly been, and Will found himself grateful for that as Hannibal came towards him. Without the pressure of professional ethics, he could let himself be touched, Hannibal’s reassuring grip on his arm guiding him down into a chair.

“I contaminated a crime scene,” Will repeated, staring down at his hands. “Jack called me in to look through the eyes of a killer, and I… I *lost* myself in them. I was the killer, I had my hands on her skin, the knife against her face… And then I *actually* had the knife. My finger prints are all wrapped up in a neat little bow for Jimmy Price, and I had her blood all over my hands, under my *fingernails*.” There was still a thin later of red beneath his nails. Will looked up at Hannibal and couldn’t read his face, too many things happening behind his eyes at once.

“You’ve never done that before.”

“No,” Will agreed, “Hannibal, there’s something *wrong* with me.” The look that stole across Hannibal’s face at that most closely resembled *hurt*, a sorrowful ache that burrowed under

Will's skin until he was mirroring it.

"There's nothing-"

"*Don't* say there's nothing wrong with me," Will interrupted, "We're beyond false platitudes, aren't we?"

Hannibal knelt down in front of Will, looking pained. "We are," He assured him.

"Then don't say it. Something's wrong with me, Hannibal, you know there is, don't pretend there isn't just because that's what people do to be *polite."*

Hannibal sighed, leaning forward until his forehead pressed against Will's, sharing stilted breaths in quiet, reassuring intimacy. "I want you to quit," He whispered. Will groaned.

"Please don't do this to me."

"What else do you want me to say, Will?"

"Something new? Anything, really, except *that*. You say it every time."

"And I mean it every time." Hannibal's hands tightened around Will's wrists, bringing his hands up so he could kiss the knuckles, pressing his lips to places where Will could still see the after-image of blood. "I'm losing you, Will. You're losing *yourself*."

"It could still be physical," Will whispered, his voice breaking sharply on the last word.

"Will,"

"I could have a blood clot," He pressed on, "Or a brain tumor."

"Will, *please*."

"I know it's scary for you," He whispered, "If it's mental, you know what to do. You know all the tricks and you can care for me yourself. But if it's physical, you have to leave me in someone else's hands. You're not a surgeon anymore, and it's a conflict of interest. And they might not..." Will choked on the words, thought of Bella Crawford, of Jack's haunted eyes. He forced himself to continue, "Even if there's something wrong, *physically*, they might not be able to fix it. But maybe they could, and you can't rule it out, Hannibal. Just because it's *probably* stress doesn't mean it can't be something else. And I-" Will didn't know when he'd started to cry, thick, heavy, embarrassing tears rolling down his cheeks as Hannibal stared up at him, cracked open and raw, "I don't want to be crazy, Hannibal, please. Please, just… Just humor me, just for now?"

"I'll make you an appointment," Hannibal promised, his own voice thick, his eyes damp, "But if they don't find anything, Will..."

"Then I'll quit," Will said quietly, and hoped Hannibal didn't hear the lie.

Michelle didn't really understand what was going on. She was stuck in the waiting room at the hospital, feeding her doll and occasionally tapping listlessly at her Kindle. It was the 'Children Under 12' rule again, keeping her stuck out here while Will and Tėtis were off getting tests done. What kind of tests? Michelle didn't know. Will didn't seem to want to tell her, and Tėtis was not going to go behind Will's back when he was standing right there. She would have to wait until they were alone if she had any hope of getting answers out of him.

The nurses kept giving her funny looks. They didn't like that Tėtis had left her out in the waiting room on her own, everyone thought she was too little. But she was a good girl, she knew not to go off on her own and talk to strangers, and she had her emergency cell phone that Tėtis kept checking in on. She was a big girl, she could take care of herself.

She just wished she didn't *have* to. She wanted to be back with Will, holding his hand and listening carefully to find out what was going on. The not-knowing was tearing her to pieces, making her hands flap and her knees shake.

Michelle knew they were lucky. They didn't have to wait for a doctor because Tėtis knew one, he could get Will in and out when most people had to try their luck and wait. But it still took a really, *really* long time. Michelle was hungry and bored when Will and Tėtis finally joined her again.

Will didn't look at her, when they returned, Tėtis guiding him with a hand on his elbow. He looked over her, through her, around her, but not at her. He moved to pick her up anyway, though, and it might have been okay if he hadn't stopped, hands outstretched, refusing to take that last step to her. That face, Michelle knew. That face was 'afraid,' but what Will was afraid of and what it had to do with her, Michelle didn't know.

Tėtis leaned in to whisper in Will's ear. She knew Will was supposed to think she couldn't hear, but she also knew from the look Tėtis gave her that she was meant to be listening in.

"You are not a danger to her, Will," Tėtis whispered. Michelle waited until Will gave in, until his shoulders slumped and his whole body seemed to droop, before she pushed herself forward that last step, clinging to Will and demanding wordlessly to be picked up.

Will lifted her up like she weighed nothing, he always did, he always lifted her like he couldn't wait to have her closer, and now was no exception, even if he still looked so… *wrong*. There were tears dripping into her hair, and she didn't understand why Will was crying. It drove a panic into her chest and her throat, pinching her words shut and sealing them away. And then Michelle cried too, sharing his misery, reflecting it back at him as they held each other.

("Is he dying?" She asked Tėtis later, when Will had gone.

"*Do you trust me?" Tėtis asked in return.*

And she did, of course she did, but later she would remember this moment and wonder if she should have said something else.)

“You lost time, miles away from home, in the middle of the night, with someone who has already killed at least one person, and you didn’t call *me.”* What surprised Hannibal was not any of the aforementioned things, Will was prone to acts of utter stupidity in the midst of his brilliance, and wandering crime scenes well after a reasonable bedtime was hardly the most ill-advised thing he’d done since Hannibal had known him. No, what surprised Hannibal was that he didn’t have to fake the hurt in his voice at all.

Will glanced towards the doorway of the dining room, where the sounds of Michelle’s play could just be heard if one tried enough.

“She can’t hear us,” Hannibal assured him, a bit impatient, sipping at his wine to try and find his relaxed state once more, “And even if she could, she’s preoccupied with making gifts for Abigail. Alana is allowing Abigail to babysit, on a trial basis, since soon Abigail will be released from Port Haven and no longer need her permission to come and go as she pleases.”

“Better to indulge her now, while she still has some control, and hope Abigail seeks her approval later.”

“Exactly. But you didn’t come here to discuss Abigail, Will.”

“Technically, I didn’t come here to discuss *anything,”* Will pointed out, “I came here to eat a good meal, tuck Michelle into bed, and maybe get laid.”

It was a crude attempt at distraction, even for Will, and Hannibal was gratified to see he at least looked a bit ashamed once the words were out.

“I didn’t mean that,” Will added hastily, “I’m sorry, Hannibal, I’m just… testy.”

“That’s certainly one way to describe it,” Hannibal said, getting in his own jab whilst they were already at odds. He sighed then, more for show than anything else, though he found it came far more easily than expected. “You were alone in the woods, you were losing time… I would have liked it if you called me. From what I know of Beverly Katz, she was a wonderful choice of safety, and yet I will admit to some hurt, Will.”

“I didn’t want you to worry,” Will admitted. Hannibal could practically taste the half-lie, but then Will corrected himself, “I didn’t want you to *know*.”

Will looked up at him, pained and lost. Hannibal wanted, not for the first time, to fix things, to take Will into his arms and heal him. But Will was so close now, so close Hannibal could see the becoming in his eyes. Hannibal’s ministrations had coaxed him into seizures, into associations. The conversations they had, with Will beneath the haze of his illness, were intoxicating. Hannibal couldn’t give it up just yet.

“I don’t want you to see me,” Will admitted, cutting as deeply into Hannibal’s core as if he’d plucked up his steak knife from the table and stabbed Hannibal with it, “Not like this, Hannibal, please. I want you to… I *need* you to see the best of me. I can’t be like *this* where you can see.”

"*All* of you is the best of you," Hannibal said, and meant it. "You are not your mental illness, Will, and your bias against it is worrisome. You have said before you are not always like this. Stress and repeated abuse of your psyche has brought you to this state, but you will have good days again. People who suffer from mental illness can still have fulfilling lives. They can have jobs, relationships..." Hannibal paused, looking towards the doorway, "Children."

Will looked startled, as he did every time Hannibal drew attention to his closeness with Michelle. "I would make a terrible parent," He whispered.

"You've already made a wonderful one," Hannibal promised him. Will drew in a deep, shuddering breath, and met his eyes, hope and terror in one beautiful creature.

"Is that where this is going?" Will asked, "Could you want that? From me?"

"I already do."

Will shook his head, beginning a rhythmic tap against the tabletop with his finger tips. Hannibal wondered if he knew he did that, if it was conscious or subconscious, and if he knew, did he realize Michelle made the same motions? Michelle could have been his by blood, and Hannibal's, Hannibal's coloring with Will's nervous stims.

"This is insane," Will finally said, "We've been together for… It's barely been two months, Hannibal."

"We've known each other longer than that."

"Not intimately." Hannibal had never disagreed with a statement more in his life. If anything, he and Will had known each other intimately from the very beginning, but he suspected Will wouldn't respond well to such a statement.

"I am not getting any younger, Will. If something feels right, if it works, I am too old to fight it, and I have no desire to, in any case."

"You're hardly old," Will said with a wry smile, one that faded back into hesitance as quickly as it came. "And this, this feels right to you?"

"It does."

Will looked back towards the doorway. "She… I know how you feel, you've been… *blatant.* But would Michelle even want that from me?"

At that, Hannibal could not help a laugh. "Will, if Michelle was left to run our lives, you would have moved right into our home the minute she met you."

It brought a smile to Will's face, a real one, one that clenched hard at Hannibal's chest.

"Yeah. Okay. Maybe I could manage that," Will said, looking back to him with that same smile, softened around the edges to be something new, something just for Hannibal. "But not right now, okay? Not like this. When I… If I get better." Will's hope trailed off into something bitter and helpless. It was unbecoming on Will, who Hannibal felt could terrorize

the world as easily as breathing, if he was so inclined. Someone with so much strength should never sound helpless.

His insecurity would have to be dealt with as well. Will's own self-loathing was so intense, he seemed completely oblivious to the fact that he was *already* a parent to Michelle, it was not a decision that needed to be put off. Hannibal indulged him anyway. "*When* you are feeling better, we will discuss it again."

Killing Dr. Sutcliffe was an easy decision to make. His fate was sealed the second he agreed to help Hannibal conceal Will's encephalitis from him; Hannibal was not going to leave any witnesses to his crimes. That Georgia Madchen walked in just in time for Hannibal to frame her, and was completely unable to identify him as a suspect, was merely an added bonus. And yet, despite the effort Hannibal had gone to in giving Will a plausible out, Will showed up the next day in Hannibal's home, looking terrified. He made it through dinner and Michelle's normal bedtime routine without a word, and Hannibal left him to it. He did not push or coax, he let Will stew in his own thoughts, knowing Will would come to him when he was ready.

That Will had terrible timing was a fact that Hannibal was going to have to learn to adjust to.

They were in bed together, Hannibal propped up against the headboard, Will in his lap. Hannibal had lost his jacket somewhere, and his tie, and was just sliding free the last of the buttons on Will's shapeless and over-sized flannel shirt, when Will's anxiety finally bubbled over and spilled from his lips.

"You would tell me if I had hurt you, right?"

Hannibal paused with his lips pressed to a spot under Will's jaw. He pulled back, staring at him curiously.

"When I lose time," Will clarified, staring down at his own hands, curled into the hem of Hannibal's button-down shirt, "If I did something to hurt you..."

"You've never done anything to hurt me," Hannibal said truthfully. If anything, a dissociating Will was an eager-to-please Will, following Hannibal's guidance beautifully. Hannibal would enjoy the fierce creature he was sure Will would become, but he would miss the blind trust Will gave when he was lost.

"Beverly said I couldn't have done it. Not without getting something on me." There it was, Will's insistence on taking everything onto himself, as if he didn't have enough problems in his own life, he needed to borrow other people's.

"You were completely clean," Hannibal reassured him, cupping a hand over his hip and running his thumb gently over the bone in a way he knew Will liked. Will closed his eyes with a soft little shudder, a gentle movement, so beautifully unexpected with how sturdy and rough Will could be.

"But I see it, when I close my eyes," Will whispered, "I can feel the blade in my hands."

“Will,” Hannibal draped a hand over the back of his neck, tugging him forward to rest against Hannibal’s chest. Will resisted only for a moment; the second his cheek touched Hannibal’s shoulder, he let go, let his entire body sink against Hannibal. “What happened to Dr. Sutcliffe was not your fault. You haven’t hurt anyone.”

And would it be so bad, if he had? Sometimes, Will’s resistance chafed at Hannibal. Sometimes Hannibal began to wonder if Will could be prompted at all, or if they would be stuck in this loop forever, Will taking two steps back for every one step Hannibal pushed him forward.

“But you would tell me if I had?” Will repeated, insistence in his voice but a tremble to his hands.

“You’ve never hurt me, Will. If you ever did, you would know.”

Will breathed out a sigh against his shoulder, and let Hannibal tug his shirt the rest of the way off.

“Michelle? Your… Your ride is here.”

Mr. Bartelli looked… Michelle couldn’t read that face, even though she was sitting there with her face cards in her hands, practicing while she waited to be picked up from school. She ignored Mr. Bartelli for another minute, shuffling through her cards until she found some that looked right. Concerned. Anxious. Upset. Michelle frowned up at her teacher as he helped her collect her things. None of those were right, there wasn’t anything wrong.

“Hey, kiddo.”

The voice was raspy, unclear, but Michelle would have known it anywhere. Technically, Tėtis had put Will on her emergency contact and pick up lists *weeks* ago, but it was still a rare treat to have him show up for her. She practically yanked her bag out of Mr. Bartelli’s hands, bolting across the classroom.

“Will!”

Will hoisted her up, swinging her onto his hip and wobbling slightly beneath her weight. She must have been getting bigger.

“Ready to go?” He was talking to her, but he wasn’t looking at her. Sometimes Will had trouble with eye contact, just like Michelle did, but he usually at least made it to her face. Today he looked around her, like she wasn’t really there at all. She didn’t like it, and she tucked her head into Will’s shoulder to avoid that blank look.

“Ready,” She said, taking in a deep breath and frowning. He didn’t smell like dogs and cologne and home, not like he usually did. This wasn’t her favorite Will-smell. This was sweat and heat and sweetness, but gross sweetness, like cough syrup. She didn’t like it.

Will had his own booster seat for her now. He helped her into it with shaking hands, handed her backpack over, and climbed in to the driver's side.

Will didn't play music while he drove, like he usually did. He didn't tell her stories or turn up songs he'd listened to when he was just a little bit older than her. He just drove in silence, past the turns for her home, out onto the highway.

"Will?" Michelle asked, peering out the window. It wasn't the way to Wolf Trap, either. She'd been only a handful of times, but she could read the signs, and none of them were right. "Will, where are we going?"

"Soon," He said, staring out the window with empty eyes, "We'll be there soon."

Chapter End Notes

Hope you like cliffhangers! :D Honestly, this chapter could have and probably SHOULD have been a lot longer, but I could not resist the urge to end it there. I know what happens next, but I wonder what your thoughts are?

This is a slightly more brief chapter, but it's necessary to transition us towards the end. And on the bright side, because it's shorter you are getting an extra post, since I originally said the next chapter wouldn't go up until next week! I'm thinking one, *maybe* two more chapters. It depends on how much our boys insist on dragging out the end of this. (You may notice there are thirteen episodes, and yet I'm predicting 11 or 12 chapters. That's because we're no longer following the script set out by the show, although that does not mean it may not poke its head in from time to time. Make of that what you will.)

Hannibal is more manipulative than usual in this, and I PROMISE you that is going to come back and bite him in the ass. Just remember that all of this is his own damn fault.

The boys wanted a sex scene. They did not get one, although they came pretty close twice. It just didn't fit the flow of things to write it out.

Idk there's lots I want to say but I feel like I can't say it without spoiling what comes next. Nor can I say when the next update will come, since I'd planned to post THIS chapter on Monday, but the words just came so easily. On the one hand, I'm babysitting this weekend and that puts a damper on writing. On the other hand, the next chapter is already at least partially written and I've been planning these things for a long time now. Let's see how easily they come to me.

(A tiny bit of reassurance for those who may worry: We're reaching the conclusion of our story. But there are more stories to come...)

Mistakes

Chapter Notes

> This chapter contains sex. I don't warn for Top/Bottom positions because it rubs me the wrong way, so you can skip that scene if you have to and I won't be offended.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Michelle had been missing for four hours and twenty-three minutes. Hannibal had counted each and every second, heart in his throat. Michelle had not been there when he went to pick her up from school, had not been home when he arrived, and the only thing that was keeping him from a true panic, like one he hadn't felt in years, was that she had last been seen with Will.

"Your partner already came to get her," Michelle's incompetent teacher had told him, "You guys should probably communicate pick up a little better."

But whatever Will's purpose had been in picking her up, it did not include taking her home to Hannibal. Nor did it include his own home. Hannibal arrived in Wolf Trap to starving dogs and puddles on the floor. In all the time Hannibal had known Will, he had never once left the dogs alone long enough for them to have an accident. Not purposefully.

Will had not answered his cell phone. Michelle's emergency phone was still tucked away in her desk; she wasn't allowed to have it at school, and the only people permitted to pick her up were Hannibal and Will, which had never been a problem before. There had never been a reason for her to bring it to school.

Hannibal was lost, adrift. He had always prided himself on being a solitary man, but now the truth was clear. His life had expanded out, twining in intricate patterns around Michelle and Will. Now, with his strings cut, there was very little left of him.

He didn't even know where to look. Will did not have safe spaces, beyond his dogs and Hannibal's home. There was nowhere else he would have gone. Hannibal drove aimlessly, as if he truly thought he might just stumble upon them if he looked long enough.

Michelle and Will had been missing for four hours and thirty-six minutes when Hannibal's phone rang.

Will dreams. In a haze of blood and stars, Will dreams.

It comes for him, lurking beyond the boundaries of the field. He can feel it stalking the tree line, eyes alight on him across the smooth, rolling grass. The baby cries. Will clutches it to

his chest and shushes it, rocking gently. The baby seeks soothing from him, and he offers it up gladly. He knows, without knowing how he knows, that nothing else matters here in this pitch-black night-world, except for the baby.

The creature peers out at him, eyes glittering in the moonlight as it takes a step forward, long heavy hooves trampling the grass in slow, measured paces.

If he stands here, it will come. It will take the pain away, the weight, the heat. But it will also take the baby, and every piece of Will that remains.

Will turns and runs.

The forest sprouts up around him, tangled roots reaching for his feet, gripping and tugging at his clothes. It tries to hold him back, as the creature stampedes after him. Will runs and runs until he is out of breath, until his arms ache and the baby cries out again. He can smell the creature's acrid breath against his shoulder, he cannot stop running, it will catch them, it will devour every shred of light that lives inside of them. Will runs and runs and Will

tripped over a tree root and into reality, stumbling out of the dream and into a sharp burst of ice-cold rain, dripping from the trees and drenching him. Michelle was soaked and shivering in his arms, held tight against his chest. He could see splashes of mud trailing up her knee-socks, from where she'd been made to walk, trailing after him, someone she trusted, someone who was supposed to care for her and who had just lost hours of time. The last time he'd been awake, he'd been at work, dry and warm, in the middle of the afternoon. He didn't remember night fall, didn't remember the rain, didn't remember when he'd grabbed Michelle.

"Oh god," Will gasped out, shaking out of his jacket in clumsy motions that nearly sent them both to the ground, "Oh god, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

Michelle blinked up at him as he wrapped her up in his jacket, half-asleep, exhaustion and fear written in the bags under her eyes.

"Will?" She mumbled, congested from the cold, "I wanna go home now."

"Yeah, sweetheart," He whispered back, tucking her head under his chin to shield her from the rain, "We'll go home."

Wherever 'home' was. Will looked around and saw nothing but trees, dark and looming, unfamiliar. All he had to go off of was the trail of muddy footprints, visible only because he had a history of hunting and tracking, both animals and people. He was thankful for his history now, anyone else might have been even more lost.

He backtracked, cautious and scared, Michelle drifting off against his chest, searching every pocket for his phone as the rain soaked him down to the bone.

"Will!"

"*I'm sorry, I'm so sorry-"*

"Will-"

"*I didn't mean to, I didn't know, I wasn't… I wasn't* ***there-"***

"Will, *please,"* Desperation, sharp and unfamiliar.

"*We're okay,"*

A breath of thanks to a god he didn't believe in, more air than sound.

"*We're okay, we're okay, but- God, I don't know where I am,"* A sob, eerily familiar, "*Oh god, Hannibal, I don't know where I am. It's so dark,"*

The jingle of keys in a clenched fist, a car door slamming. "Describe it to me, Will, tell me."

"*It's. It's just trees. Just trees and rain. Trees and rain and mud and-"* A gasp, a sound of relief. The sleepy murmur of a child, the world's most beautiful sound. A car door slamming. *"I found the car. I found it."*

"Where is the car?"

"*I must have run out of gas. It won't turn on. She'll be cold,"*

"Where is the car?"

"*God, it's freezing, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry,"* Another sob, words choked with saltwater and rain, "*I'm so fucking sorry."*

"*Will,* where is the car?" The door slams. Jogging footsteps, pitter-patter of rain against skin and the phone, running and silence until finally-

"*Junction 270. On-ramp north towards Frederick."* A few more signs rattled off, the huff of panting breath. Not much, but enough to work with.

"Alright. Alright, Will, I'm on my way."

"*I'm so sorry."*

"Don't hang up, Will. Stay on the line."

"*So fucking sorry."*

The wooded road Will had found himself on wasn't far, the apex of a V-shape between Baltimore and Wolf-Trap. Will had likely driven himself in circles, on and off of highways, until he'd run out of gas just a few minutes outside Hyattstown, Maryland. Hannibal pulled

up less than an hour after the call, only a few minutes after Will's phone battery gave out and left him in silence.

Hannibal parked a few feet back, illuminating the vehicle as a warning to any other cars that might drive by. Will was in the driver's seat, but he climbed out when he saw Hannibal coming, shirtless and damp, face red and shadowed. He felt tight and achy, skin a size too small for his body.

Hannibal hurried for the backseat, pulling Michelle out and into his arms. She was fast asleep, wrapped in Will's shirt and coat. They were both wet through from the rain, and she shivered even as Hannibal tucked her into the heat of the Bentley. Will could see tear stains dried on her cheeks. She'd barely roused during their walk back to the car, but what little she'd said had been confused and scared.

Michelle barely stirred as Hannibal set her into her booster seat, wrapping her in a thick blanket he'd packed. Hannibal kissed her forehead, checking her temperature. Will had done his best to keep her from the worst of the chill, and when Hannibal didn't immediately panic, he could only assume he'd been successful. Hannibal brushed her hair away from her face, catching in half-dried tangles and tugging a twig from where it had lodged itself. He took his time checking her over, buckling her into place before he turned back to Will.

Will had pressed himself back against the car, cold, wet metal against pale skin. It bit into him in a soothing, icy pain. He felt nothing but aching terror, body shaking from a cold that had long since numbed him. Hannibal had to move him bodily to get him wrapped in the second blanket, tugging Will against his chest.

"What..." Will trailed off, voice bleary and raspy from his crying. He flinched as Hannibal ran careful hands over him, checking him for damage. Hannibal lingered over his ankles; Will was dimly aware that he'd lost a shoe, but he didn't feel the pain that would have accompanied a twist or a bruise. He was shivering, but that lessened with every second he was wrapped in a warm, dry blanket. "I'm sorry."

Hannibal ignored him, checking his pupils next, always a doctor, even after what Will had put him through. Will was pretty sure he was lucid now, though he could at least admit to himself he wasn't the best judge.

"I'll tell Jack he needs to find someone new if he still wants me to talk to a psychiatrist," Will continued. Hannibal frowned, nudging him towards the warm car.

"Will-"

"I lost time," Will whispered, "I don't even remember picking her up. I never would have… I wouldn't… I knew I was losing time, I wouldn't have picked her up if I'd been aware."

"I know," Hannibal assured him, "Get in the car, Will, it's cold." The rain was plastering his hair against his forehead. Any progress Will had made towards drying out was swiftly being undone.

Will frowned, confused and anxious. “You don’t have to do this,” He insisted, “You don’t have to make yourself responsible for me. I… You have Michelle. She’s safe now. You should get her home.”

“Will. Get in the car.”

He was wet. He was wet, and cold, and confused. Hannibal was still coddling him, too nice of a person, too soothing. Will had ruined everything. He had endangered Michelle, lost them both in an unfamiliar forest, soaked and chilled. He had driven a *child* around while he wasn’t even present in his own mind.

“I can drive myself home, I’ll call someone to bring me gas, you don’t have to be with me, you don’t have to ever see me again-” Will was starting to panic now, breath coming in shallow gasps, chest heaving beneath the blanket. His lungs ached, screaming for oxygen that wouldn’t fill them.

“Will!” Hannibal grabbed for him, cupped Will’s face in his hands, gripping so tight Will felt like he was shattering into pieces. Hannibal’s eyes were wide, more open and honest than they’d ever been. Will suddenly felt like he had never before this moment seen Hannibal Lecter truly let go and feel something.

“Do you have any idea what it would have done to me, if I’d lost you?” Hannibal whispered to him, “Do you think, do you *honestly* think, that if I’d come here and Michelle was perfectly safe, but you were… Do you think I could have just walked away from that? That I would have picked up my daughter and we would have resumed our lives as they were before you? Do you think there is *any* going back for me now?”

Will stared up at him, lost and feeling suddenly so much smaller than he was. “Hannibal...”

Hannibal silenced him with a kiss, damp and salty from the rain and their tears. “Get in the car, Will.”

“Hannibal, I-” Will had not intended to argue, but Hannibal misread him. With a growl, Hannibal wrenched the keys from Will’s hand, pressing hard on the lock button and sealing them inside Will’s car with a slam of the door. He moved Will bodily, hands gentle but firm as he pressed Will into the passenger seat of the Bentley.

“You’re coming home with me,” Hannibal told him, swatting Will’s hands away from the seat belt and doing up the buckle himself, like Will could no longer be trusted for even the simplest of motions. “I will feed Michelle, and you, and get you both to bed, and in the morning, we will go to the hospital and demand another scan.”

Will stared up at him, helpless and hopeful, all at once, tracking his motions around the car. “They didn’t find anything,” He whispered, once Hannibal was secured in the driver’s seat.

“Then we’ll get a second opinion.”

“I… I’ll quit my job,” Will found himself promising, honesty in every word. “If they don’t find anything, I’ll tell Jack Crawford he can fu- He can leave me alone,” Michelle was asleep

in the back seat, worn out, but Will censored himself anyway.

Hannibal seemed to slump for a minute, hands tight on the steering wheel, staring out at the road. “You’ve promised me that before.”

“I mean it, this time.” Will told him, “If they don’t find anything, if it’s… If it’s *mental illness*, I will do whatever you tell me to. I’ll let you take care of me, like you’ve been trying to.”

“Will...”

“I love you, Hannibal. And I’m sorry.”

Hannibal looked up at him, then swung the car back off the road, throwing it into park and dragging Will into a fierce, almost painful kiss. Will was breathless and boneless against him, moving where Hannibal put him, clinging to his shirt with weak, shaking hands.

“We’ll get a second opinion,” Hannibal promised, “And I won’t let this happen to you again.”

Hannibal didn’t let Will out of his sight, once they were back in his home in Baltimore. Will followed him around obediently, quiet and hesitant, half-lost to his own exhaustion. Hannibal forced himself to focus on Michelle’s needs first, although she was already ready to sleep and would likely have been fine if he just tucked her in for the night. Instead, he went through all the motions of bath and bed time, Will at his heels. Michelle was washed and dried and tucked into her blankets before she finally spoke.

“Did it find us, Will?” She mumbled into her pillow. Will startled, hand lingering over the blankets he’d been smoothing out.

“What?”

“You said we had to keep moving,” She explained, yawning, “You said we couldn’t let it catch us.”

“Let what catch us?” Will asked, fear-tinged and cautious. Hannibal looked between the two of them, an outsider to this connection that had held them tonight.

“The stag.” Michelle was asleep before Will could answer. Hannibal guided him out with a firm grip on his shoulders, leading the way to the master bath.

“I can go home,” Will suggested halfheartedly. He wanted to leave just as much as Hannibal wanted to let him. Hannibal gave him a stern look and settled him against the bathroom door.

“What you can do right now is take off your clothes,” Hannibal said, fiddling with the taps until the shower filled with a satisfying steam. When he turned back, Will was still dressed in his damp pants and borrowed shirt, fiddling with the hem as if he thought Hannibal might let him argue his way out of this. As if Hannibal was going to let Will wander out of his line of sight for even a second.

“You have no idea what you almost took from me tonight,” Hannibal told him softly, guiding him out of his clothes. Will let himself be undressed, hesitating only when Hannibal reached for his own clothes.

“I’m-”

“I know you’re sorry, Will, you’ve said,” Hannibal hushed him with a soft hand pressed over his mouth, a hand which then slid up to feel the burn of his forehead. “But you’ve been apologizing for Michelle. You don’t associate any importance with *yourself*.”

Will shivered, leaning into Hannibal’s hand. It must have felt cool and soothing against his fevered brow. He would keep until morning, safe where Hannibal could watch him, but Hannibal still found himself wanting to drag him straight to the hospital, a full night’s sleep be damned. Hannibal distracted himself with folding his clothing and Will’s, tucking it away on the counter.

“In, Will. Michelle is asleep, it’s time to care about yourself for a change.”

Will let Hannibal guide him under the warmth of the spray, malleable beneath Hannibal’s studious hands, taking in every inch of his skin to seek out any injuries he might have missed. This was the softness Hannibal had come to like, the flexible, changeable man Hannibal had pried out with syringes and seizures. It was suddenly sour on Hannibal’s tongue, all sweet victory crumbling to dust. Will had taken a step Hannibal had not foreseen, and nearly lost Hannibal his child and his… his *partner* in one fell swoop.

It was the first time they’d been naked together, completely. The first time Hannibal could take in Will in his entirety, and he couldn’t even enjoy it, too busy studying every inch of Will’s skin for damage. He was mostly unharmed, if muddied. Hannibal forwent a washcloth in favor of cleaning Will with his hands, soft circles over his skin until the forest debris drifted away down the drain. Will leaned into his touch, flushed from the heat of the water and his own mind, but willing to turn however Hannibal put him. When Hannibal tilted Will’s head back to rinse shampoo from his curls, Will met his gaze, eyes clear and vibrant with life, alert, lucid, beautiful. Hannibal could not hold back anymore.

“It would have killed me,” He whispered against Will’s mouth, and meant it with a fierceness that bordered on fury. Will whimpered against him, hands clutching Hannibal’s shoulders for balance in the slick slide of the shower. The water eased the way for Hannibal to press up against him, sliding and pushing, purposeful. Will met his body with his own, rolling his hips against Hannibal’s until they were both hard and aching.

“Not here,” Will whispered, voice rough with arousal and nerves. Hannibal wanted to kiss each and every worry away from him, until Will understood exactly what he meant to Hannibal. “Not here, not like this.”

Hannibal didn’t need to be told twice. He pulled Will from the shower, drying him in quick but efficient motions, pulling Will along until he could lay him out over his bed, pale skin on navy sheets.

Will tasted clean and clear, no artificial scents between Hannibal and the smooth skin that broke into goosebumps beneath his lips. Hannibal had wanted to devour him once. Now he wanted much the same, but entirely different. He left a trail of kisses down Will's body, lingering over the dip of his hip with tongue and teeth, until Will was arching and pleading beneath him. Hannibal licked and sucked until he'd left his own bruise on Will, livid against the bone. He pressed his fingers there even as he moved on, rubbing over the mark in slow circles just to enjoy the way Will twitched and gasped beneath him.

Down, just a bit more, and Hannibal could finally take Will into his mouth, tracing patterns with his tongue that left Will panting, rolling his hips until Hannibal had to pin him with an arm across his stomach, just to keep things from finishing to quickly. Hannibal licked and sucked, claiming and tasting in every way he could, until Will's body relaxed under his touch, trusting Hannibal to guide him through. Hannibal could have finished him like this, the taste of Will thoroughly memorized, but he would not have been satisfied. Not tonight. It pained him to think that he had nearly lost this chance entirely, and he would not let himself miss out on any other part of their time together.

Will was restless beneath him, tossing his head back and forth, hips jerking in Hannibal's grasp. He pleaded wordlessly, with keens and whimpers that made Hannibal want to give him everything, right up until Hannibal slid a lube-slick finger over his entrance. Will's entire body went tense, locking up around Hannibal, locking him out. Hannibal pulled off of him with an obscene sound that made Will flinch in his newfound shyness, staring up at Will's face to read him.

Will had been through a lot tonight, exposed to Hannibal in every way. He didn't want to be cracked open, the very core of him available for Hannibal to touch and see. He was too raw for that just yet, and Hannibal did not have it in himself to feel disappointed, not when Will was alive and safe in his bed.

"I'm sorry," Will babbled, throwing an arm over his eyes to block out the light and Hannibal's face. "I'm sorry, I can..." He started to spread his thighs a little wider, force himself open for Hannibal's perusal. Hannibal could have taken the invitation. A few months ago, a week ago, this morning, he would have. But now, he looked into Will and *saw*, and *understood* the things that made him tick, the things he felt. He could no sooner force his way into Will, unwilling consent or not, than he could cut off his own hands and give up his art. Will broke beautifully, into sharp and deadly stained glass shards, but Hannibal would not break him in this.

"No," Hannibal said, hands on Will's thighs to keep his legs close around Hannibal's chest.

"But I-"

Hannibal hushed Will with a kiss, surging up against him like a wave, crashing over Will with every bit of emotion he had inside of him. His cock brushed Will's own, slick with saliva and obscenely hard, and Hannibal groaned and reached for the lube again. Will tensed beneath him, too long starved of any real trust to take Hannibal at his word, but when Hannibal's fingers didn't return to him, he relaxed with a curiously confused expression.

“Hannibal, what...” Hannibal could see the exact moment Will figured it out, eyes following where Hannibal’s hand disappeared behind himself, taking in the twitches of Hannibal’s shoulder and the determined set of his brow. Will flushed a deep crimson, propping himself up on an elbow for a better look. Hannibal obliged him, twisting slightly between Will’s spread thighs until Will could look over his shoulder and see the way he prepared himself, quick, efficient, but still tantalizing. The tension that had flooded Will was gone, replaced with a tempting arousal that Hannibal wanted to taste. He licked his way into Will’s mouth, swallowing the low whine he let out when Hannibal spread lube over his sensitive cock and lined himself up.

Hannibal wiped the lube off on the bedspread, enjoying the way the carelessness only seemed to spur Will on, and cupped Will’s jaw in his clean hand. “Just like this,” He said, words he had told Will on near-countless nights before, words that never failed to earn Will’s trust, trust that Hannibal would not overwhelm him, would bring them into pleasure together, rather than leaving Will to flounder.

Will squeezed his eyes shut tight when Hannibal slid down onto him, but Hannibal kept his own open, memorizing every slight twitch of Will’s expression, the way he bit down hard on his bottom lip to keep back a moan. Hannibal freed that moan with his mouth, kissing over that flushed lip until Will opened to him, panting into his mouth and chasing Hannibal’s tongue with his own.

Will filled him intensely, perfectly. There had been a hollowed out place inside of Hannibal for as long as he could remember, and Will seemed designed for it, every sharp edge matching one of Hannibal’s own. Hannibal took his time, adjusting in slow, steady rolls of his hips, until he was flush against Will, until they were one creature, deadly and beautiful, and Hannibal wished he had known how gloriously the spark would chase up his spine, the way Will’s hands would caress his hips, hesitant and light, uncertain of their permission. Hannibal pressed his hands over Will’s, encouraging, until Will finally found his courage. Bracing his feet flat against the bed for leverage, his thighs caging Hannibal in against him, Will rolled his hips up, tugging Hannibal down against him, again and again until he ripped a noise from Hannibal that sounded so raw, so aching, that both of them teared up again.

Hannibal was more than happy to guide Will in this, as he had done in everything else. He knew best how he liked to be touched, and he was learning Will’s own responses little by little. He gripped one-handed on Will’s shoulder for balance as he rode him, a burn in his thighs and hips that could be nothing else but satisfying. With his other hand, he encouraged Will’s exploration, guiding him through the places Hannibal most liked to be touched; the jut of his hipbone, the soft peak of a nipple, the side of his neck where Will had kissed and licked every other time they joined. Will followed that touch with a bite, too soft to break skin, but firm enough to leave Hannibal gasping.

“Will-”

“Oh god, *Hannibal*-”

Will’s hands left him. Hannibal had barely a second to whine out his disappointment before they both tangled in his hair, yanking him down into a bruising kiss, Will’s teeth and tongue sharp and talented against him. Will broke the kiss to suck at that spot on Hannibal’s neck,

hands still tight in Hannibal's hair, holding him in place as Will thrust up into him, once, twice-

The spill of Will inside of him was more than enough, but that Will's climax came with teeth pressed into the sensitive skin of his throat was what set Hannibal off. He spilled between them, still rocking his hips to urge Will deeper into him, against every piece that made him squirm. Hannibal moved until he couldn't, until he was oversensitive and raw, until he had laid himself bare before Will. Will looked at him and didn't quite see, not yet, but he saw *enough*, and in this moment, Hannibal could settle for that.

Hannibal had worn him out, as intended. Will needed the rest, the relief. When he tried to sit up, Hannibal pushed him back down against the pillows, fetching a damp washcloth to wipe them both down.

"Shouldn't *I* be doing that for *you*?" Will asked, eyes already half-closed with exhaustion. Hannibal smiled and let his touch linger, cleaning Will's stomach more thoroughly than was strictly necessary.

"Arbitrary roles have no place in our bedroom, Will. I want to care for you, so I will. You need to rest, and so you shall. Close your eyes."

Will didn't argue with him, though Hannibal could see his desire to lurking just under the surface. Instead, he let Hannibal coddle him, tucking him into soft blankets, stripping the lube-stained duvet from the bed and replacing it with a clean cover, something to keep Will warm beside him. Hannibal slid into bed and pulled Will to rest against his chest, and Will went, without the slightest trace of the hesitation Hannibal had come to know so well.

Hannibal was not a miracle worker; Will did not sleep any better beside him than he might have in his own bed. But when Will woke, sweat-damp and sobbing from a night terror, Hannibal hushed him and wiped him down with a towel, switching the blankets out and pushing Will back to the bed any time Will tried to help. When Will struggled to drift off again, Hannibal rubbed his back in soothing circles and recited foreign poetry against the soft skin of Will's jaw, until Will's dreams were flooded with languages he did not speak. When Will tried to rise and wander off, still asleep, Hannibal woke him gently mere feet from the bed and set him back into it, with firm hands and softer voice.

Will slept just as poorly as he would have at home, but it was the best night of sleep he'd had in months. In the morning, Hannibal fed him dry toast and hot coffee, coaxed Michelle into a dose of Tylenol for the cold she'd caught, and ceded the house to Abigail and Alana, who showed up with bright, false smiles.

"Hannibal said I could live here," Abigail told him shyly, while Hannibal and Alana discussed Michelle's routines in the other room, "When I get out. I have a release date now."

"That's good," Will said, trying not to show surprise as he buttoned himself into his coat, "You were worried about where you would stay."

“He certainly has the room.”

“That he does,” Will said, and grinned back when Abigail offered him a wry smile, one that faded quickly into something more serious.

“You’ll be okay, won’t you?”

Will took Abigail’s hands in his own, met her gaze even though something behind her eyes always echoed and ached inside of him. “I’ll try my best to be.”

“I guess that will have to be enough.”

“They’re not going to find anything,” Will whispered to him in the waiting room. Hannibal frowned and tried not to be too impatient. Will *would* decided to start believing him *now*. After all the time Hannibal spent trying to convince him his job was causing him to lose his mind, now, while Hannibal was trying to convince him he had something physically wrong with him, *now* Will would decide to take ownership of his own mental health issues. Will was beautiful and intoxicating, and Hannibal could no longer imagine life without him, but he was also incredibly *frustrating* at times.

“You don’t know that,” Hannibal told him, twining their fingers together in a tight, reassuring grip, and making note of the one nurse that frowned for later dinner options.

“They didn’t find anything last time.”

“Dr. Sutcliffe was an old friend of mine, Will, and I would not have brought you to someone I did not approve of, but he was not infallible.”

“Hannibal,” Will’s voice wrapped softly around his name, a plea, a burst of affection. Will reached out to touch his shoulder and Hannibal leaned into the motion, allowing Will his attempts at reassurance. “Hannibal, what if they *don’t*?”

“You said that you would quit your job.” A promise Hannibal was now going to need to find another way to extract from Will.

“And I will,” Will, said, “If it’s… mental illness, if it’s stress, I’ll cut out all the stress, I’ll take care of myself. But… But if I’m mentally ill...” Will paused, his eyes darting away from Hannibal’s, insecurity settling back over him like an ill-fitting suit, too tight in some places, too loose in others, always a thick curtain separating the truth of him from Hannibal, from the world. “If I’m mentally ill, you shouldn’t have to-”

“If this is your mind,” Hannibal interrupted, politeness be damned, “Then you will come home with me, where you belong, and we will do whatever it takes to find you balance.”

“But you shouldn’t have to-”

“I find that there is very little I *have* to do in life, Will, but a great many things I want to do. Do you think, if they don’t find anything today, that it will change how I feel about you?”

The guilty look on Will's face said he did, in fact, think that, but Hannibal had been expecting it and continued as if he hadn't seen it.

"You have a place with us, Will. You belong with me, with Michelle, every piece of you."

"I could have hurt her last night."

"But you didn't. And I blame myself for that far more than I blame you, Will. You were not in control of your actions. I should have been paying more attention to you, to your symptoms. I was not there when you needed me, Will, and I will never be sorry enough for that."

Hannibal suspected he could not have surprised Will more if he had been actively trying. Will looked at him with wide, startled eyes, and then squeezed his hand where it gripped Hannibal's.

"It didn't occur to me to blame you," He said, leaning against Hannibal's shoulder, "And it still doesn't. So don't blame yourself, okay? We… If we're going to do this, then we're in this together."

"Together then, dear Will," Hannibal said, and kept Will close to his side until they were finally called back.

Encephalitis.

Anti-NMDA Encephalitis.

He wasn't crazy.

He *wasn't crazy*.

Hannibal was asking questions, asking about care and treatment options. Will was dimly aware that he was being checked into the hospital, that Hannibal and the doctor were passing about terrifying phrases like 'risk of brain damage' and 'recurring symptoms' and 'worse before it gets better', but all of that was overshadowed by that single, fantastic realization. He wasn't crazy. There was something concrete wrong with him, something that could be *fixed*.

Still, Will's peace would only take him so far. Most of his good mood had evaporated by the time they were settling him into a hospital bed, and he glared at Hannibal. "If this can be treated with medication, why do I have to stay here?"

"It's just for a few days," Hannibal assured him. He had an uncharacteristic look of relief across his face. It settled into the banks of Will's memory, a moment of honest vulnerability that made Hannibal all the more human. "They have to make sure there was no lasting damage. You've been running a fever for weeks, Will. Let the doctors do their job."

"*You're* a doctor," Will said petulantly, further irritated by the indulgent smile Hannibal gave him.

“Just a few days,” Hannibal promised again.

Just a few days turned out to be one. One single night before Will’s world crashed down around him with a phone call from Jack Crawford. He was grateful to be out of the flimsy hospital gown and back into his own clothes, less grateful for the explaining he knew he would have to do any second now.

“Will,” Hannibal stood in the doorway, holding a Tupperware container, staring at Will’s sneakers like they had personally betrayed him, rather than Will himself.

“Abel Gideon has escaped,” Will said, apologetic, reaching out for Hannibal. Hannibal jerked away from him, walking around Will to set up the food on the tray by Will’s bed. He moved in stiff, jerky motions, anger bleeding through in waves. Will winced.

“I fail to see what that has to do with you.”

“Hannibal-”

Hannibal spoke over him, unusually rude and louder than Will was used to, “It has absolutely nothing to do with you, in fact, as you are an inpatient in the hospital, receiving treatment for a very serious illness, and will be here for the next several days at the very least.”

“*Hannibal-”*

“Will, you will sit down in this bed and eat your dinner if I have to carry you here myself.”

“I’m not your child, Hannibal!” It wasn’t the first time Will had said it, but it was the first time Hannibal had flinched away from the words. “I don’t *belong* to you,” Will said, softer, “I belong *with* you, not *to* you.”

“Then be here, with me.”

“You know why I can’t.”

“You could have died,” Hannibal reminded him sharply, “Even if the inflammation itself didn’t kill you, you could have veered off the road in one of your dissociative states and I would be home, explaining to my daughter why she would never see you again.”

Will flinched, jerking away from Hannibal’s icy gaze. “That was a low blow,” He whispered, feeling a small hint of pleasure at the shadow of regret that twisted Hannibal’s face, “You said you didn’t blame me for that.”

“And I don’t,” Hannibal replied, smooth and composed as he ever was, “But that doesn’t mean I would like a repeat performance. Encephalitis is very serious, Will. You will still be experiencing symptoms, you could lose time, you could hallucinate.”

“I’m not driving myself,” Will assured him, “Jack’s picking me up and driving me to the crime scene. I won’t be alone, Hannibal, I won’t drive or wander off, and I promise, if we

have to, I'll let you check me right back in when I'm done."

"Jack Crawford continues to sink his hooks into you," Hannibal said bitterly. Will reached for him, relieved when Hannibal welcomed the touch to his shoulder instead of shrugging it away.

"I'm the only one who can do this," He said softly. Hannibal wanted to argue, Will could see the fight blazing in his eyes, but it was gone as quickly as it had come.

"Come home to me," Hannibal said, cupping Will's face in his hands. He kissed him softly, carefully, like Will was breakable, like he was something precious. "If you have to go, if you have to do this, come home to me when you're finished. Come home to me in once piece."

"I promise," Will whispered, and kissed him again.

Will came home to him. Will came late at night, just as Hannibal was tucking Michelle into bed. The doorbell rang and Hannibal answered it, Will in the doorway, flushed and sweating, eyes distant and vacant, long gone, succumbing to his fever once more. Will came home to him, and brought a guest, gun trained on a calm, curious Dr. Abel Gideon.

Hannibal took them both in, Will, unharmed, but delirious, and Gideon, a silent Cheshire cat, and stepped aside.

"Come on in."

Chapter End Notes

No, Hannibal did not call the police, or, indeed, anybody at all while Michelle was missing. Stubborn idiot. He was trying very hard to be confident in his ability to find Will and Michelle on his own (He failed at this confidence btw).

I used google maps and pinpointed an EXACT location where Will ran out of gas. It's about 40-50 minutes from me, and I resisted the urge to drive there because there was absolutely no reason and that would be stupid. I wanted to do it anyway, haha.

I wrote the second half of Hannibal finding them first, then went back and wrote the first half. Except. I accidentally wrote the first half from Hannibal's perspective instead of Will's and had to awkwardly Frankenstein it into the correct POV. Hopefully I didn't mangle it too bad.

I frequently have mentioned in my author's notes and comments that Hannibal acts very emotionless. Hannibal decided to make up for that this chapter by having EVERY FEELING HE COULD POSSIBLY MANAGE. I'm so sorry guys. I did my best to try

and keep him in character, but this is a man who has gone through a bit of a shock. I think he's earned his feelings.

(Btw guys, Hannibal didn't keep Will home another night out of a desire to be awful some more. He just needed to take care of his daughter and then find her a babysitter. Parenting priorities, guys!)

I don't think this fic needs to be tagged for D/s undertones, but I'm pretty sure if you squint you can figure out my kink preferences. Oops. Fun fact, though. Despite the fact that I refuse to tag for it, I actually DO have a Top/Bottom preference, and have occasional backspaced out of fic that didn't have my preference if the rest of the fic failed to catch me. I prefer Top!Hannibal. So. Of course. In my very first explicit penetrative sex scene for this pairing... We get Bottom!Hannibal. Yeah, I don't get me either.

Rereading your own sex scenes is really fucking weird and I don't like doing it.

Also, I've asked a friend to draw a picture of Michelle for me, so expect that in the next few weeks, hopefully.

There's only one more chapter, guys! And then I can finally tell you where we go from here, although I'm sure many of you have guessed.

Confrontation

Chapter Notes

This is it. The end of the road. For now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal stood at one end of the table, Abel Gideon seated calmly at the other end. Between them, closer to Hannibal but with his gun shakily trained on Gideon, Will trembled and swayed on his feet.

“A clutch for balance,” Will whispered, hands clenching on his gun, “You told me that, once. So, I’m here. *Balance me*.” It was a plea, a soft whimper of desperation. Hannibal wanted to reach out and tug Will into the safety of his arms, but didn’t dare with Will’s fingers twitching on the trigger. He was shaking far too badly for Hannibal to trust in his aim.

“Will. Put the gun down.”

Will didn’t respond, keeping his eyes locked on Gideon.

“You know, I told him I was looking for the Chesapeake Ripper,” Gideon said, tone as pleasant as any dinner party conversation, “And he brought me here.”

Hannibal didn’t dignify Gideon with a response. Will deserved, and had, all of his attention right now.

“Will. The gun.”

“Will?” Bad timing, of course. Lately, too many extra variables seemed to be going wrong for Hannibal. Michelle stood in the doorway, pajamas rumpled from tossing and turning. She hadn’t quite been asleep when he’d tucked her into bed, and her door had been left open. The noise had probably upset her.

Will broke his gaze from Gideon, taking Michelle in with wide, unseeing eyes. He whimpered at whatever it was he saw there. His gun jerked, enough to give Hannibal a sudden splash of panic, before he righted it back on Gideon.

“Go back to bed, Michelle,” Hannibal said sternly. Michelle looked at him for only a moment before turning right back to Will, to the gun. Hannibal had raised her to be fierce, to be brave, and to fake bravery if she couldn’t call it up. For the very first time, he regretted that decision, as Michelle disobeyed him entirely to stare, quiet and curious, at Will.

“Do you see?” Will asked Hannibal, and his eyes bounced over the three of them, Gideon-Hannibal-Michelle, in a loop that was dizzying just to watch. “Do you *see*?”

“What is it you see, Will?”

Will laughed, choked and rough, not the way he would laugh for Hannibal when they were alone together, when Will was whole and healthy, at least for the moment. “I see everything,” He hissed, “I see *you*. I see so much, you think I don’t but I do. I see you. I *see* you.”

Curiosity overwhelmed self-preservation, as it often had in Hannibal’s life. “And what do you see in me?”

Will whimpered, and shook his head. “I see it. I see it, but I don’t *want* to. I don’t want to know, don’t make me look, Hannibal.”

Disappointment crashed over Hannibal like a wave, the tide pulling Will away from him with every new breaking swell. “Why?” He asked, “Why don’t you want to look?”

“Because I don’t want it to be true,” Will whispered to him. His grip on the gun wavered. If Hannibal waited, if he was patient, he would be able to pluck it from his grasp.

“Why?”

“Because then I’ll have to destroy you.”

And for a moment, Hannibal gave up.

For a moment, he thought, this was it. This was the closest Will could ever come to understanding him, and he had been a fool to think he could open his life to this man, to anyone who Hannibal had not personally nurtured and raised to understand.

And then Will swung his gaze back to Gideon, and Hannibal was suddenly back, months earlier, in the Hobbs kitchen, watching Will in the beginning of his becoming.

Hannibal had never given up on anything he wanted before, and he was not about to start now.

“What else do you see, Will?”

“Garrett Jacob Hobbs,” Will rasped, “What do you see?”

Hannibal looked from Will to Gideon. Gideon’s expression was not quite a smirk, more an open acknowledgment of his own curiosity. Gideon was a lesser entity, cattle, but of the cattle, he was a prime cut. He was growing into his wings, unable to discern where he ended and the Chesapeake Ripper began. His newest art was primitive, crass, but *fascinating*. Fredrick Chilton becoming his own gift basket had been a particularly inspired touch. And Hannibal…

Hannibal was *curious*.

“I see no one. Will, there’s nobody there,” Hannibal said, and, though he did not know it, made the final mistake that would seal their fates. He knew that Will relied on him, knew that Will trusted him. But he also knew that Gideon had more artwork inside of him, bubbling up

under the surface. Perhaps even something beautiful So Hannibal looked Will in the eyes, in his roving, hazy eyes. And Hannibal lied.

“No,” Will sobbed, jerking to face Hannibal, moving entirely, until the gun settled it’s aim over Hannibal’s chest. “No, you’re lying.”

“Will, you have encephalitis, you’re hallucinating-”

“Don’t lie to me!” The words came out in a shriek, almost a yelp, “Not you, please, please don’t lie to me. I trust you, I *trust* you.”

“Give me the gun, Will,” Hannibal said, carefully settling his hand over Will’s.

“No, I saw him, I *touched* him.”

“Will,” Michelle piped up, drawing the attention of all three men. Her voice was barely above a whisper. Her eyes slid over Abel Gideon, and then dismissed him entirely. “Will,” She said again, “Will, there’s nobody there.”

And whatever doubts Will must have had, whatever shadow he saw in Hannibal, those things did not extend to Michelle. Hannibal’s brave, *brilliant* little girl. Will sobbed again, louder, tears streaming from dazed eyes, body shaking.

“No,” Will mumbled, “No, no...”

“Give me the gun, Will,” Hannibal repeated, wrenching it from him when Will’s eyes rolled back and he began to tremble. “Will. *Will*.” Will did not answer, but he did not collapse either. Hannibal pressed a hand to his clammy forehead and checked his vitals. “He appears to have had a mild seizure.”

“You don’t seem concerned,” Gideon remarked.

“I said it was mild.” Hannibal turned to Michelle, who’s own eyes had started to glaze over, sealing herself off from emotions that would be too much to handle all at once. “You did very well,” He praised, guiding her to a seat at the table once he was sure Will would remain standing on his own. She went obediently, almost disappearing beneath the table-top without her booster.

Gideon watched them both with no small amount of interest. “An interesting family you have here, Dr. Lecter.”

Tėtis and Dr. Gideon had a conversation. Michelle didn’t care. She cared about Will, who looked lost and empty and not-there. She didn’t think he saw her at all, saw any of them. It scared her. She remembered that look from a long car trip and a walk through the woods, and she wanted it to go away.

Michelle didn’t know who Dr. Gideon was, or what he had done to upset Will before this. And she didn’t care. There was something wrong about his eyes. Not dark-empty-wrong like

Mr. Budge had been. This was a different wrong, a laughing-happy-inappropriate wrong. Everybody had their shadows, and Tėtis was teaching Michelle to appreciate hers, but Dr. Gideon seemed to like his shadows a bit too much. He was cheerful when nobody had any right to be cheerful, not when Will was there-but-gone.

When Dr. Gideon got up to leave, he hesitated behind Michelle's chair, hand extended over her head. Michelle hunched in on herself, even as Tėtis stared Dr. Gideon down.

"I would not test my hospitality, Dr. Gideon," He said sternly.

Dr. Gideon kept still behind Michelle. She could feel him there without looking, sharp heat at her back even though they never touched. Her instincts screamed out to her that he was there, that she needed to be aware of him, to always know where he was in the room.

His hand came down to ruffle her hair, just once, before she reached out and sliced at him with the steak knife she'd been hiding in the deep pocket of her bathrobe. Dr. Gideon stepped back with a hiss. His pants and the terrible angle had protected him from the worst of it, but the serrated edge had torn through the fabric enough to leave him with a pale-pink scratch just above his kneecap. Michelle admired it rather than look up at him, knife still held in front of her.

"Little kitty has claws," Dr. Gideon said to Tėtis. Michelle thought he sounded happy about it, though she didn't know him well enough to understand why.

"I did warn you," Tėtis replied, and he was *definitely* happy about it, Michelle let his pride wash over her and soothe the sharp edges the night had worn onto her skin.

Dr. Gideon wasn't bleeding, so he didn't have to stay and be patched up. Good. He left, and Michelle let herself look up at Will.

When Tėtis inspected Will, walked him through weird and uncomfortable exercises Michelle didn't like (*Will didn't smile like that, nobody smiled like that),* there was no trace of his closed-off expression from earlier. With Dr. Gideon gone, Tėtis finally looked at Will like he was important, like he was precious, like their family could be fixed and whole. Michelle relaxed, safe.

When Will finally came back to himself, he was in a hospital bed. Michelle was tucked under his arm, fast asleep with her head pillowed on his chest. Pieces of blonde hair tickled his chin, but Will couldn't make himself move her, no matter what the nurses and doctors likely thought of her crowding his monitors.

"You awoke an hour ago and demanded her," Hannibal said from the chair beside his bed. Will blinked fuzzily at him, until the world finally solidified in his vision, "I was in no position to deny you anything."

Hannibal looked like he hadn't slept in weeks. It was a wrongness that permeated through Will's bones, until they ached with guilt. Will winced and looked away.

“I’m sorry?” Will didn’t have enough memory remaining to explain what he was sorry *for,* but he said it anyway. Sorry for putting that look on Hannibal’s face, maybe.

Hannibal reached out for Will’s face, cupped his jaw in his hand and turned Will just enough to press a soft, chaste kiss to the corner of his mouth. “Will,” he whispered, his breathe a butterfly kiss against Will’s skin, “If you try to leave this bed again before the doctors discharge you, I will not be held accountable for my actions.”

Will looked down at Michelle, sleeping with her arms and legs thrown haphazardly across Will’s chest and hips, and then offered Hannibal a shy smile.

“She’s not here for my benefit,” He accused, voice light and teasing, “She’s here keep me from standing up.”

“I may have enlisted her help,” Hannibal allowed.

“That’s cheating, siccing the kid on me.”

“All is fair in love and war.”

“And which is this?” Will asked before he could stop himself. Hannibal looked at him, open and honest and *aching*. Will kissed him just to keep from hearing the words. He’d said them, once before, but he hadn’t heard Hannibal say them back yet. Will knew, as raw as they both were, they would tear apart his fragile calm. It was too much, too much for right now, for such little energy. There would be plenty of time to say them later.

“No exertion,” Hannibal whispered against his mouth, pushing Will to lie back against the pillows once more, “You’re to be resting, not getting me kicked out of your hospital room. I already pushed the boundaries of visiting hours last night. One of your nurses has a vendetta.”

Will chuckled softly and let Hannibal tuck a blanket around his shoulders, careful around Michelle, who shifted and whined when Will refused to lie still, before turning his thoughts to the next question.

“What happened?” His memory was fuzzy, a series of blanks and hazy nightmares.

Hannibal sighed and moved his hand down to card through Michelle’s soft locks.

“You gave everybody quite a scare,” He began, “You dissociated at one of Abel Gideon’s crime scenes. Jack called me in a panic; You had taken the first car you found with the keys left in it.” Hannibal took in a deep breath and looked at Will, still with that lingering fear that stretched so wrong across Hannibal’s typically calm features. Will squeezed his hand, aiming for reassurance and mostly feeling like a failure. “Will… I thought for sure that would be it. That the next call would be telling me where you had crashed. Thankfully, you came straight to me.”

Will relaxed slightly. He’d known, of course, that he was fine. There were no new injuries across his body for him to catalog. Still, he’d been waiting for bad news. There was too much

tension across Hannibal's shoulders for everything to be fine.

"You weren't lucid. I'm afraid you woke Michelle. You had your gun-" Will's heart leaped into his throat, "-although you did not aim it at us. You were hallucinating enemies. I was unable to calm you down, until you had a seizure. I took advantage of it to disarm you and get you tucked into my car. And now, we are here."

"That's..." Will swallowed, biting his lip, "That's a rough night."

"For everyone involved," Hannibal agreed.

"Did we… What happened with Gideon?"

Hannibal hesitated. He glanced away from Will, and Will knew. This was the tension he'd seen in Hannibal. This was the bad news Will had known was coming.

"Dr. Gideon is back in custody. However, I'm afraid he found Alana first."

Will went rigid. His whole body stiffened up, hand grasping onto Hannibal's, tight enough that it must have hurt. "Is she-"

"No," Hannibal interrupted, turning his gaze back to Will and running a soothing touch up his arm to his shoulder. "No, she's going to be fine. But he made sure to leave his mark."

Alana came to Will herself, in the end. Hannibal excused himself to feed Michelle lunch, although Michelle had been reluctant to leave Will's side since she'd awoken, leaving Will and Alana with privacy.

Gideon had attempted to carve her open. He'd managed to succeed, at least partially. A thick patch of gauze covered the left side of her face, hiding the half of a Chelsea smile he'd managed before back-up had come to Alana's aid, and Will could guess the location of the other lacerations by how stiffly Alana walked. When she reached a hand out to Will, he saw bandages concealing the thick friction burns that circled her wrists.

"I lost one of my kidneys," Alana informed him from the safe corner of her mouth, voice muffled and thick, "They say I'll have to be careful if I ever want to have children. It's likely I'll end up on a strict diet and bed rest. But I'm lucky. I'll still be able to *have* them. He nicked a few other vital things, but nothing that couldn't be repaired. I might not be so *pretty* anymore, but I'll be fine."

"You'll always be beautiful," Will promised. She gave him a rueful smile.

"Don't lie to me like that, Will. It's not like you."

"Maybe not conventionally," Will amended, "But you'll still be beautiful. Scout's honor."

"You were never a boy scout."

“I could have been.”

Alana laughed and shook her head. “Alright. I’ll be a very unique beauty, then.”

“Damn straight.” Will smiled at her, brittle and broken. “I’m sorry, Alana.”

“What for?” She frowned, rubbing her thumb over his hand in gentle, soothing circles. “If you had known, you would have been there. And I would have been *furious* at you,” She added with a stern look at his IV stand. “You should have been here, far away from this mess. And the second I get my hands on Jack Crawford, I’ll make sure he knows it.”

“I’m going to be fine, too,” Will promised her, “I have a release date and everything. As long as the steroids take, I can go home Wednesday.”

“Alone?” She asked, concerned.

Will bit back a laugh. “Well, when I say *home*...”

“Hannibal,” Alana summed up. Will nodded, and the visible corner of her mouth turned down, pulling a wince from her. “Abigail will be there as well. The two of you, adjusting to a new home after a huge mental and emotional upheaval. At the same time.”

“Say what you mean, Alana. Don’t dance around things. Not with me. Say it the insulting way.”

“I don’t want the two of you piggybacking off of each other’s distress,” She said. Will shook his head.

“We won’t. We’ll be fine. Support systems are good, right?”

“Will, your entire psyche revolves around piggybacking off of others’ distress,” Alana pointed out, adding, when Will glared, “You said to say it the insulting way. Would you like me to dress it up for you?”

“No, I think you got your point across.” Will sighed, leaning back against his flimsy pillow. Hannibal had offered to bring a nicer one, but Will wanted as little tying him to the room as possible. “Do you know what the first thing Hannibal did was when they checked me into the hospital? The first time? He called around and had my dogs put up in a boarding kennel. A nice kennel. All seven dogs. He offered Abigail a home when she had none. I was fevered, dissociating, and hallucinating, and I took myself straight to him, straight to safety-” (*Something clicked in Will’s brain and he pushed it down he wouldn’t think of it wouldn’t acknowledge it it wasn’t true) “*-and he brought me here and infuriated every member of staff who got in his way, and he did it *politely.”* Will huffed out a laugh, and then handed Alana a picture, a series of crayon scribbles, misshapen and spilling over the outlines. “Michelle brought me that. It’s a family picnic.”

And so it was, the four of them, Hannibal-Michelle-Will-Abigail, helpfully labeled (thankfully, since Michelle did not seem to be inheriting Hannibal’s talent for art). Alana

studied it for a long moment and then handed it back with a careful touch, honoring how much it meant to Will.

“She loves you,” Alana said slowly.

“I love her,” Will replied, “And I… I love Hannibal, Alana. And there’s a place for me with them. I’m going to take it.”

A place, carefully honed out and safe *(A memory: Garrett Jacob Hobbs at the dining room table. Abigail’s face after a bite of dinner. “I told him I was looking for the Chesapeake Ripper, and he brought me here.” A memory-a dream- a nightmare-* ***not real***), somewhere Will belonged.

Somewhere everything would be alright.

Somehow, Abigail was assigned to babysit him. There was a small part of Will that was offended by the very concept of needing a babysitter, and an even smaller part that found the entire thing hilarious. The rest of him was just grumpy and tired, already bored with the idea of strict bed rest. It wasn’t as if there was anything wrong with his limbs, after all, and there was no reason he couldn’t at least be home with his dogs.

Hannibal wasn’t bored with the idea at all. In fact, he had a distinct ‘mother hen’ air about him as he tucked Will into his own bed, plied into a sleepy obedience by a frankly disgusting amount of medications and blankets. His joking threat to chain Will to the bed if he moved sounded less like a joke and more like an *actual* threat. Will decided not to find out; he suspected Hannibal’s version involved less ‘adult playtime’ and more ‘forcible napping.

So Will was tucked into an obscenely overstuffed bed, with plenty of water on the bedside table and several very thick books clearly lifted from his own home. It was, all things considered, hardly the worst way to spend a Tuesday.

“Will you be okay while I pick Shelly up from school?” Abigail asked that afternoon, as Will downed his next dose of medication.

“Gimme ten minutes and I’ll be unconscious,” Will promised. It was the one good thing about thick, heavy, hard-to-swallow pills: Will hadn’t had this much uninterrupted sleep in *months*.

“Alright,” Abigail replied, though she still looked wary, “Hey, it’s just you, me, and the kid tonight. Hannibal said he’d be late, he’s apparently behind on some paperwork. He left me something to heat up, but I thought maybe you might miss take out.”

Will winced. He knew Hannibal had missed a lot of work to care for him, but the one time he’d tried to bring it up, Hannibal had kissed away every word, until Will stopped trying to speak at all. A childish, if effective, technique. “Better eat what he left us,” Will decided, “You know he’ll check, and I can’t seem to convince him I don’t need to be on a special diet. I think cooking makes him feel useful.”

Abigail stared for a long minute. “He’s a *doctor*.”

“That’s what I said.” Will shook his head and laughed. “You better get going. Michelle’s waiting for you.”

It came in a dream, stalking the halls, clip-clopping footsteps. Stairs were not an obstacle to a creature that tilted in and out of reality on a whim.

The stag stood in the doorway, looking over Will, helpless and frozen in bed. Soft feather pillows, with occasional pricks of pain where the edges of the feathers peaked out. Will knew that if he turned, if he tore into those pillows with nails and teeth, the rain of feathers would be ebony.

It was here, in bed with him, surrounding him. It had always been here, just beneath the surface. He had never escaped from it. Rather, he had walked right into its lair and laid himself at the altar, ripe for tasting.

There were antlers sprouting from the bed, caging him in, trapping Will in place with sharp rips of his skin, rip rip ripping ***Ripper.***

Will woke with a start to Michelle scrambling her way into bed with him, babbling about her day, headless of the fact that Will had been asleep mere seconds before.

“That sounds fun,” He mumbled, reaching out along the bedspread to ground himself as Michelle continued her chatter. No feathers. No down pillows. Silk and cotton, high quality and soft.

No raven-feathered stags in the doorway.

The doctors had said the symptoms of Encephalitis didn’t go away immediately. He could expect continued hallucinations that would slowly taper off as the medication did its work. It was just a nightmare. Just a bad dream.

Michelle slowed in her patter, clearly disgruntled to not have all his attention. “Will are you alright?”

And Will looked at her, at her big brown eyes, and lied. “I’m fine.”

Will was allowed to leave bed for dinner, Michelle dancing around underfoot and Abigail hovering an arm’s length away, although there was absolutely nothing wrong that might prevent Will from *walking*. The mollycoddling was going to get old very quickly. He would have to talk to Hannibal about that.

Hannibal.

As if summoned, the ebony-painted creature from his nightmares, humanoid form of the haunting stag, sat at the head of the table. Will blinked it away as he took the seat for his own, feeling out of place in Hannibal's shoes. Just a hallucination. Not real, not *real.*

But what was real? The scent of the meat Abigail had heated up, wafting strong and sweet before him? Red sauce like a stab wound draped across loin- what kind of loin? Abigail had not thought to ask.

Abigail took a bite, closed her eyes. Chewed once. Chewed twice. Will's fork froze halfway to his lips as she grew feathers and antlers and Will *knew*.

He had always known.

He just hadn't wanted to be right.

Something was wrong.

Something was wrong, inside where no on could see, but it spilled over into Will's eyes and Michelle knew it was there.

It was always in the eyes.

Will's eyes went wide and dark, as he looked at Abigail, watched her eat. His mouth moved like he wanted to say something, but nothing came out. Michelle looked back to Abigail and went to take a bite of her own food, and in the corner of her eye, the movement was nothing but a blur.

The plate went flying, skittering across the table to shatter on the floor. Michelle jerked away from the table and dropped her fork, turning to yell at Will.

The words died in her throat. There were tears welling up in Will's eyes, and when he looked at her, Michelle felt like he could see every lie she'd told, laid out on a platter. Will stared at her, into her, and took a deep breath that made his whole body shake.

"What the hell, Will?" Abigail shouted. Will turned to look at her and she shrank away. She must have seen the eyes

For a long moment, they stared each other down, and then Will shoved himself away from the table, pacing back and forth.

"Will," Abigail said in a soft voice, "Will, are you okay? Are you hallucinating?"

Will laughed, but it didn't sound happy or pleasant. It sounded sharp and cruel. "Hallucinating? Oh no. No, I'm seeing clearly for the first time in a long time."

"Do you need me to call Hannibal?"

“Don’t you dare!” Will snapped, turning the full force of his glare onto Abigail. “Don’t you say fucking *anything to him.*”

“Will...”

Will lashed out at the table again, shoving his own plate and Abigail’s, sending them to join the shattered china on the floor. Michelle yelped, scrambling out of her seat to pull away from the rage.

“Did you know?” Will yelled, turning to Abigail, “Did he tell you?”

“I’m calling Hannibal,” Abigail told him, trying for firmness but mostly sounding wobbly. Will was on her before she could even dial her phone, wrenching it from her hands and throwing it across the room. It shattered against the wall besides Michelle’s head, and Michelle let out a small, terrified sob.

That seemed to get through to Will, even if nothing else did. He turned to her with a softness to his face, something overshadowed by his darkness.

“Michelle, honey...” He came for her, so tall and big and Michelle didn’t want to, but she took a step back anyway. Something in him was wrong, and she didn’t want it.

Will’s face crumbled. “Sweetheart,” He said, as if he could soothe her just with nicknames, as if anything would undo tonight. He took another step towards her, and there was nowhere else for Michelle to go, so she let him, creeping further and further up until he could scoop her up in his arms and rock her like a baby, tucking her face into his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Michelle. I didn’t mean to scare you,” He whispered. To Abigail, who had started to inch towards the kitchen, he snapped, “Don’t you dare.”

Abigail and Michelle both stiffened. Michelle could feel Will take a deep breath, his chest rising and falling beneath hers.

“Just… Just get in the car.”

Abigail stayed put. Will sighed.

“I’m sorry I yelled, Abigail. I just… We can’t be here when Hannibal gets home. We need to go.”

Michelle tried to straighten up, to question this obviously terrible decision. Will bore her back down against his shoulder with a firm hand on the back of his head.

“Get in the car, Abigail.”

Abigail looked from Will’s back to Michelle’s watery eyes, and did as she was told.

In the front seat of the car, Abigail brought her knees up to her chest, staring out the passenger window. “Where are we going?”

“Home,” Will answered, voice short and tense.

Abigail turned to frown at him. “He’ll find us there,” She said gently, “It’s the first place he’ll look.”

“I’m not running from Hannibal. I’m not stupid enough to try.”

“Then why are we running at all? We could have stayed home and waited for him.”

Will smiled. It showed, in the rear-view mirror, a violent, terrifying slice across his face. “Denying him the home field advantage.”

In the front seat, Abigail tucked her face into her lap. In the back seat, ignored and overlooked, as children often were, Michelle pushed ‘send’ on the phone she’d hidden beneath her coat, and then slid it carefully into the fold of the seats.

Wolf Trap.

The girls looked scared, they looked tense and uncomfortable. It ate at Will, sank fangs into his chest and ripped him to pieces.

Wolf Trap was not the haven it had once been. Without the dogs, it was just a house, and a nearly-unfamiliar one, at that. Will no longer found home here. Home smelled of freshly cooked meals and sounded like the carefully plucked strings of a harpsichord. Will had still spent most of his nights in his own home, yet suddenly everything seemed dusty and shadowed. He felt like he was standing in someone else’s home.

He’d tried to tuck Michelle into the bedroom upstairs, away from what he knew was coming, but she was having none of it. She would not be left alone, and as much as Will wanted to protect her from the inevitable fallout, he couldn’t find it in him to force her away. She curled into Abigail’s side instead, both of them curled up on the couch while Will sat on the edge of his bed, hunting rifle in hand, carefully cleaning and loading the weapon.

“I don’t like this,” Michelle finally said, her voice soft and frail in the unnatural stillness.

“I don’t like it either,” Will told her, honest and aching.

Michelle’s little face scrunched up, confusion and upset twisting her features. “Then *why*?” She demanded, “I just wanna go home!”

Will didn’t tell her he wanted to go home too. He didn’t tell her that he wanted to be tucked back into bed, that he wanted to take the pills he’d left behind and let them lull him into sleep. That he wanted to wake to Hannibal coming home, that he wanted her to bounce into the room in the morning, hungry and excited, and demanding pancakes. He didn’t tell her that he would have given anything to rewind a few hours and unknow what he knew.

He didn't tell Michelle any of this, but it lingered in his chest, twisting and painful. "It'll be alright," Will said, and hoped it was true.

Hannibal arrived sooner than Will had expected. He came through the back door, looking to sneak up on Will, and he was successful: Will had been watching the driveway.

He was barefoot, looking to creep silently across the floorboards like he had with all of his victims, but he did not know Wolf Trap like Will did. It was why Will had led him here, away from a home he'd know inside and out, far better than Will. Hannibal caught a loose floorboard, and Will turned on him, rifle in hand, when it creaked.

They watched each other for a long minute, silent and waiting, before Will finally spoke.

"You came prepared to strike," He noted, nodding towards Hannibal's bare feet.

"You left a mess of the dining room. I wasn't sure what state I'd find you in." Hannibal took a step forward, heedless of the weapon Will had trained on him. "Will, you're very sick. The doctor told you it would take some time for your symptoms to fade."

"Don't try that on me," Will hissed, "Not now. Not when I can finally see you so clearly."

Hannibal watched him. Will realized, now, that he was always *watching*, always keeping his eyes trained on Will, looking for something that lurked just beneath the surface. Will wouldn't let him find it. Whatever Hannibal had tried to create in him, he would carve it out with his own fingernails before he would let it take root in him.

"Perhaps this is not a conversation to hold in front of the children?" Hannibal finally suggested. Will nodded stiffly.

"They can go upstairs," He said, gesturing with the rifle. Abigail could keep Michelle safe from the knowledge of what was happening, and Will could keep them both safe from Hannibal, "There's a master bedroom, Abigail, with a lock on the door. Don't come out until I come for you, okay?"

Abigail looked from Will to Hannibal, who nodded his assent.

"No!" Michelle insisted, squirming as Abigail picked her up. For once, Will was grateful for her undersized frame; she struggled and pleaded as she was carried, but Abigail managed to get her out of the room, out of danger. Will waited until he heard the door slam shut before he spoke.

"You killed those people. All of them. The Ripper victims. Cassie Boyle."

"Would it make you feel better to believe I did?"

"Shut up," Will hissed, hoisting the rifle just a little higher, aiming properly, "Don't do that, not now. I know. I know what you are."

“Dehumanizing me may make you feel better, but it doesn’t change my personhood.” Hannibal took a step closer. Will swung the rifle up towards his head and rested his finger on the trigger.

“Was it Abigail’s idea to hide Nick Boyle’s body? Or did you decide to be ‘helpful?’”

Hannibal raised his arms, showing off that he was defenseless, perhaps trying to soothe Will’s ire. He stepped back, giving Will more space. “As I told you before, what I did for Abigail was with her best interests in mind.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Then I don’t see the point in asking me any questions, if you’re going to continue dismissing my answers out of hand.”

Will’s vision swam. It took him a long moment to realize he was crying, and he lowered the rifle just enough to free up a hand and swipe angrily at his cheeks. Hannibal latched onto the moment of vulnerability, daring to step close once more.

“Why didn’t you call the police? Have them search the house?”

“Because I was hoping you would prove to me it wasn’t true,” Will whispered, “Because even then, even after finally *understanding* you, I wanted to be wrong. I wanted to be crazy. I told you once that I didn’t want to be crazy, but I would take that, I would lose my *fucking mind*, rather than have this be reality. Are you happy? Are you happy with what you’ve done to me?”

And because he’d wanted to know, Will didn’t say. Because the Chesapeake Ripper had sank his claws into Will’s mind, and Will had *needed* to be the one to see this through to the end, not Jack or any other FBI agent.

And because, in his medicated and angry haze, Will had left his cell phone on the nightstand beside Hannibal’s bed.

“We don’t need to resort to violence, Will,” Hannibal urged him, “Put the gun down.”

Will barked out a laugh and shook his head. “Violence is what you are,” He said, “It’s *all* you are.” He told himself that, had spent the past few hours trying to convince himself. Hannibal’s face twisted. Will imagined, for a second, that Hannibal was hurt, that Hannibal was capable of feeling hurt, that Hannibal was capable of *feeling*.

“You’re not going to shoot me, Will,” Hannibal said, and he sounded so certain that Will almost believed it himself. “An unarmed man? You can’t claim self-defense here. They’ll send you to prison.”

“You’re the Chesapeake Ripper,” Will spat, “With everything they’re going to find in your home, they’ll probably give me a medal.”

“Will. After all we’ve been through, could you really shoot me?” Hannibal looked at him, looked soft and gentle. Open. Raw. It was the way he looked at Will when they were in bed

together, long after the lust had been sated, when sex had been replaced with intimacy.

It was the wrong face to make. Will raised the gun again. “Think of every lie you told me. Then ask me again.”

“Will, put the gun down and talk to me. Please.”

“Are we having conversations again?” Will asked, soft and bitter, “Are you going to try and open up my head to root around inside again?”

“Will, put the gun down.” It wasn’t Hannibal’s voice. Hannibal startled as badly as Will did, or at least made a convincing attempt at faking it.

Michelle stood in the doorway, clumsily armed with Will’s old police force gun, the one he had always kept loaded in his bedside table. He had a new handgun now to carry on him, and it was that one he armed himself with when he slept downstairs. He’d forgotten entirely about the old one, with no reason to childproof his home.

Abigail trailed in behind her, and the cold, calculating look on her face told Will all he needed to know. She probably hadn’t encouraged Michelle to interrupt, but nor had she tried very hard to stop her. Abigail knew exactly where Will’s buttons were, and she was pushing them. Abigail looked at him with understanding in her eyes. Too much understanding for any teenage girl. He wanted to take it away from her, but he hadn’t been the one to give it. It was a gift from her father, given long before Will had ever met her.

The last piece clicked into place.

Will wavered, there in the living room, as everything he knew twisted and turned *again*. Every time he thought he knew something, every time life finally began to make sense, it all got flipped upside down. What next, would he find Michelle keeping secrets too? The thought made him want to laugh, so he did, until tears threatened to spill over again.

“You killed Nick Boyle,” He whispered, “And Hannibal told you to hide the body, and you didn’t even question it, did you? You went right along with it, because it wasn’t the first body you had to get rid of.”

Abigail blinked, and the cold, calculating look vanished. She looked young, younger than she’d ever been in Will’s eyes, young and scared.

“You were the lure,” Will hissed, and Abigail trembled.

“Hannibal said you would understand,” She gasped, “He said you would help us. That there was a place for me.”

“God, you’ve all been lying to me.” Will’s hands had started to shake. He couldn’t remember when, couldn’t remember why. He felt overheated, achy.

“Will,” Hannibal said, in a soft, soothing, ‘patient voice,’ something that must have worked a thousand times in therapy but only felt sharp and pained to Will.

“Don’t,” Will begged. The gun jerked in his hands. He swung back around to stare Hannibal down, and the sight of him, black as tar, antlered and feathered and closing in on Will, made Will sob. “Don’t touch me,” He begged, “Don’t lie to me, god, I *trusted* you, I-” Will drew in a breath, and aimed the rifle at Hannibal’s head. It didn’t occur to him to watch Michelle. He didn’t for one second think that she would actually shoot, and so, when she screamed, it took Will a long moment to even turn his head.

Michelle was 8 years old. She didn’t know to squeeze a trigger instead of pull, she didn’t know how to set her sights, she didn’t know to expect a kick-back. The bullet veered wildly off-course, embedding itself into one of Will’s bookshelves, and the force sent Michelle toppling.

Michelle had missed entirely, but she’d achieved what she meant to anyway. Will took an instinctive, protective step towards her, and Hannibal took advantage of his momentary distraction to wrap a thick, muscled arm around Will’s throat, prying the gun from his hands and pinning him in place.

“Shh,” Hannibal whispered in his ear, tightening his grip as Will struggled against him. “Shh, it’s alright. Close your eyes.”

From his pocket, Hannibal drew the syringe he’d hidden in his pocket. Will jerked again when he saw it, pleading in broken, strained gasps. Hannibal shushed him again and carefully pinned Will against the ground, maneuvering his sleeve up in careful, steady tugs, until he could slide the needle home.

The world started to blur immediately, a familiar chill settling in, something Will recognized, but couldn’t place.

“I’m sorry,” Hannibal murmured, pressing a kiss to Will’s temple, “I promise, when you are ready, I’ll fix everything. But you’re not ready yet.”

He’d done it before, Will realized. Whatever Hannibal had given him, it wasn’t the first time. He had just enough time to feel another stab of betrayal, before the room vanished.

Will looked smaller without the gun, smaller still sprawled out across the floor. Tėtis pulled him up and into his lap, holding him like he held Michelle after a bad dream. Michelle wanted there to be room for her too, but instead, she stepped back towards Abigail.

“I don’t think you need this anymore,” Abigail said gently, prying the gun out of Michelle’s hands. Michelle never wanted to see it again, never wanted the feel of cold metal between her fingers ever *ever* again. She looked up to tell Abigail so, and froze.

Abigail looked scared. Michelle knew this face, knew it backwards and forwards. Abigail looked scared, and her hands shook. Michelle had known Tėtis would have a plan, that he would fix the mess Will was making, but she’d expected it to be… kinder, somehow. She’d expected Abigail, who was an adult as far as Michelle was concerned, to be *in* on it.

“Abigail,” Tėtis said, shattering Michelle’s train of thought, “I once told you you had broken my trust. I have an opportunity for you to earn my forgiveness. Will you take it?”

Abigail looked at Tėtis. Michelle looked at Abigail. Abigail gave a long, slow nod, and stepped forward to help Tėtis settle Will into the bed.

“Michelle.” Tėtis reached out a hand for her, and after a moment’s pause, Michelle went, tucking herself into his side. He pressed a kiss to her hair. “Remember when I told you things would get worse before it gets better?”

“You said Will wasn’t ready yet,” She whispered, “You said he might have to go away.”

“I did.”

Michelle looked at Abigail, pleading for her to say something. For another adult to step in and fix this, because frankly, Tėtis’s idea of ‘fixing’ didn’t seem to be fixing anything, not the way Michelle wanted it to be fixed.

Abigail said nothing. She stood by the side of the bed, one hand trailing gentle patterns over Will’s hand, the soft curve of his wrist. She stood, completely silent, waiting for Tėtis to tell her what to do.

Michelle looked back at Tėtis and shook her head. “No.” She’d meant it to sound stern, a grown-up voice, but instead it spilled from her in a whine. Tėtis frowned.

“Michelle,”

“No!” Michelle shrieked, stomping her foot for good measure. “No, no, no!” Each repetition came with another stomp. Somewhere, she heard something tumble from a shelf. Good. She hope it broke. “No, no, no, I don’t want to play anymore!” There were tears spilling from her eyes, like she was a *baby*, a stupid, useless baby who the grown-ups would never listen to. “I don’t want to play anymore,” She begged, “I want to go home! I want to go home with Will and Abigail!”

Tėtis crouched down before her, cupping her face in his hands. He wiped away her tears with his thumbs, calloused and strong and usually so soothing. Today they were sandpaper. She wanted to break them.

“Will is coming home,” He promised her, “Just not yet.”

“Why *not*?”

“He’s not ready-”

“You keep saying that!” Michelle shrieked, “I don’t care if he’s ready! I care if he’s ours!”

“Will is a danger to us,” Tėtis said firmly, “He’s decided on a truth, and he’s going to tell a lot of people. They’ll take me away from you, and you will never see me again.”

Michelle flinched, but the worst part had not come yet. The worst part spilled from Tėtis's lips and froze her insides until everything was stabbing ice.

"They'll find out what you did, Michelle."

They didn't talk about it. The Bad Thing Michelle did. The very first time Tėtis had taught her how to tell a new truth so people would believe it. Sometimes, everything seemed so fuzzy that Michelle believed the Right Truth too, that it was an accident, that it wasn't her fault.

But sometimes she dreamed about it, about the look on Mommy's face as all the red poured out of her.

"They'll find out what you did," Tėtis said again, "And they'll take you away. They'll take us all away."

"I don't want to go," Michelle whimpered.

"Then you're going to have to be my brave girl and help me. Just for a little while."

Michelle looked over at Will. Sleeping like this, he looked calm for the first time in a while. He didn't have any worries like this. He didn't have to. Tėtis was taking care of everything. "When can he come home?" She asked.

"As soon as I've laid the foundations for a new truth."

Michelle bit her lip and looked down at the floor, across people's feet, up the wall to the plastered-over hole in the chimney. Tėtis gently pulled her back to look at him again.

"Michelle, do you trust me?"

Michelle looked at him, looked him dead in the eyes, "Yes, Tėtis."

And lied.

Hannibal was on his way to Wolf Trap, but Alana lived closer. He'd called her in a panic when he'd come home to find Will and the girls missing.

"*Abigail was supposed to be watching him,"* He'd said, *"But if Will was dissociating, it's possible he may have upset or frightened her."*

Will hadn't been himself lately, not with the encephalitis eating away at his brain. Alana was kicking herself for not putting her foot down with Abigail. They never should have been left alone together, not when they were both still in recovery.

"Will?" Alana called, knocking on the door. Through the window, she saw Will rise from his bed onto shaking limbs. He wobbled towards the door, and then stopped halfway through, his shoulders rising and his body jerking. He turned, suddenly, and bolted for the kitchen. Alarmed, Alana let herself in.

“Will? Will, are you alright?” Alana hurried after him, joining him in the kitchen just in time to watch him vomit into the sink. “Will!”

There was blood all over the floor, tacky and congealing. Alana had always been told she had a mother’s instinct. She went to Will immediately, rubbing her hands over his shoulder blades, checking him for damage *(Because the alternative, the only other answer, refused to stick in her head she refused to think it she couldn’t-),* but when she saw the sink, her soothing hum died in her throat. They were silent, staring into the sink together. Alana pulled away, clutching her hands to her chest, her shoes sticking to the blood.

A loud cry startled them both. Across the room, the closet door burst open and Michelle came stumbling out, skidding across the bloody floor to throw herself at Alana’s legs. Alana scooped her up immediately, relief and horror merging as she stared at Will.

“Will,” Alana whispered, cradling Michelle’s head against her shoulder, “Where’s Abigail?”

Will looked down at the ear, and closed his eyes. “I don’t remember.”

Dr. Bloom was nice, when she wasn’t trying to keep Michelle’s family apart. She was nice as she knelt before Michelle in the big room with the big mirror in it. Tėtis had been allowed to come back with her for the questions, since she was so little. He wasn’t allowed to do anything that might be ‘influential,’ though, so he stood by the mirror while Michelle sat in the big plastic chair and kicked her feet.

“Michelle,” Dr. Bloom said in her soft, nice voice, “Can you tell me what happened to Abigail?”

“They were arguing,” Michelle said, shaking her head, “I don’t like when people fight. I went and hid. It was loud and I was tired. I didn’t like it. I didn’t come out.” It was the Right Truth she’d practiced with Tėtis, a truth that would be good for Will, a truth that was almost a Real Truth because she really *hadn’t* seen what happened to Abigail, so it was almost like not lying at all.

Michelle looked at Dr. Bloom, with her nice smile and her eyes that didn’t smile at all, her eyes that just looked like crying, and wondered if maybe it was the Wrong Truth after all.

Will didn’t remember.

He didn’t remember driving to Wolf Trap.

He didn’t remember what happened to Abigail.

He didn’t remember how the *ear-*

There were a lot of things Will didn’t remember, but there was one thing he did.

Hannibal came to him as soon as Will was secure in his cell, his cozy new home. He looked tired, wounded. It was his most talented act yet.

There was a line visitors were not meant to cross, to keep them safe from the inmates. Hannibal crossed it anyway, almost looking like he couldn't help himself. Even as guards started to yell, he reached for Will, one shaking hand pressing past the bars towards Will's own.

Will stepped back, out of reach.

"Will," Hannibal pleaded, and if the wool had still been over Will's eyes, he would have *ached* at the look on Hannibal's face.

"Dr. Lecter."

Chapter End Notes

Wow. Okay, guys. Regular notes, first.

First of all, I don't know shit about medicine or encephalitis, so I hope nothing is majorly off.

When I started out writing this story, it was going to be a series of drabbles set in the universe of the show. Nothing was going to change. So, I spent most of the story planning for the end to be the same as the end of Season 1. I planned the sequels (and oh there will be sequels) around that.

And then Hannibal decided he was in love and flat out refused to frame Will.

I tried so hard to get him to change his mind. After all, the next story *cannot* happen if Hannibal doesn't frame Will. But Hannibal resisted me. If he loved Will, if he truly cared for him, there was no reason to frame him.

So approximately two chapters ago I had to completely revamp my ending while *still* landing Will in the BSHCI. This was not easy. But, apart from a few little snags (The *actual* answer to 'Why didn't Will call the police and have them check the house?' is 'Because it did not occur to Strats until she was writing the confrontation that he *should have done exactly that* and she then had to frantically come up with a reason why he didn't.'), I think I've mostly achieved my goal. I'd still like one day to come back and completely rewrite this story, but as it is, I'm proud of it.

This is a long thing. I don't write a lot of long things, and I finish even less things. So thank you so much for taking this journey with me!

My update schedule is about to slow down, unfortunately. I wrote the entirety of Family of Choice while unemployed, which I am no longer. I also have another WIP going, and a few challenges in the next few months I want to meet. But Michelle and her family will return. We have not seen the end of her yet (My friends, I have her entire goddamn life planned out. Including her preteen rebellion phase).

I hope you enjoyed reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it. Stay tuned for 'All The Wrong Choices,' coming in the next two weeks, as well as a drawing of Michelle, hopefully also in the next few weeks but that one's out of my hands.

End Notes

Come find me on Tumblr!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!